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## Structural Violence and Social Suffering among Marginal Nepali Migrants

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Cover photo: Migrant worker, brick kiln, Kathmandu valley, Nepal.  
In the background the hovels where the migrant workers live.  
Photo by: Antonio Donini

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## ABSTRACT

One of the significant transformations in the political economy of rural Nepal is the gradual weakening of traditional forms of attached and caste-based division of labor. Not only has there been a diversification of rural livelihoods from land- and agriculture-based to non-agricultural- and non-land-based sources, there is also a growing and widespread mobility of labor within and outside the country. Mobility ranges from commuting for day labor to nearby areas and seasonal mobility to towns and cities or across the border to India, to organized migration to the Gulf, Southeast Asia, and beyond. Mobility of labor has become a significant and increasing part of the rural political economy. The existing debates on migration in Nepal are largely limited to labor migration to international destinations, ignoring the significance of the largest number of migrants, who move internally or across the border to India. These debates are dominated either by discourses on remittances or portrayal of these migrants as voiceless victims. This research captures the social meanings associated with migration experiences amongst the poorer sections of the population and considers both internal and international labor migration. The main aim of this research is to document social suffering among migrants and locate their experiences in the wider context of social transformation in Nepal. We conducted in-depth interviews with the subjects themselves and a range of other stakeholders, such as manpower/recruitment agencies and trade union representatives, and by using participant observation in different settings including cities like Kathmandu (looking at brick kilns and the service, manufacturing, and construction sectors), towns and rural areas in Nepal (looking at the service and construction sectors), India (domestic work, service sector, etc.), the Gulf States (construction, agriculture, and service sectors) and other specific sites where various forms of exploitative, bonded labor and trafficking practices are widespread. Through these in-depth interviews, we were able to document and explain the nature and practices of labor from the perspective of vulnerability and livelihoods.

This research argues that while the discussion on migration, remittances, and their impact on poverty alleviation is very important for Nepal's development, we cannot ignore the exploitative conditions under which such gains are made and the suffering of migrant workers that is visible in terms of despair, bodily harm, discrimination, and death. Building on our earlier research, we argue that mobility of labor has not necessarily meant more freedom for poorer migrants, although the idea of freedom appears to be driving much of the out-migration from rural Nepal. Further, mobility and wage labor have led to contradictory class mobility; i.e., while migration has certainly opened up opportunities for cash income, the nature of work and working conditions have often resulted in social dislocation, humiliation, debt entrapment, social suffering, and structural violence. Migrants' mobility highlights an apparent contradiction and their liminal position: they leave the villages because of their redundancy in the rural-agrarian labor processes as well as because of the attraction that modernity has to offer in the cities and towns, but they are constantly driven back to their village because of the transient and time-bound nature of their mobility. One of the paradoxes of Nepali migration amongst the poorer population is that the identity of the migrant remains attached to the village even if the working sites and sectors are "modern" and urban. For marginal migrants, the circulatory nature of migration does not appear to be as transformative as might have been expected: while life in the destination may well be urban and modern, their identity remains rural, or at best "rurban." Our findings indicate that despite known risks, a large number of migrants appear to "consent" to work in exploitative working conditions.



## I. INTRODUCTION

*As we entered a brick kiln, located just off the main highway going out of Kathmandu some 30 minutes from the city, one of the first things we saw was the smoke coming out of a chimney, small huts made with bricks, stacks of bricks, both raw and cooked, and a large number of people moving around, doing different things. As we approached, two boys aged 10–12 were mixing the mud and making dough, another young girl aged around 12 was drying the bricks and counting them. Three young children of about 2–3 years old were playing around in the same area. The next day was a day off in the kiln and the boys were not there but we met a man who was making dough next to where the two boys had been working. When asked why he was working on a day off, he replied that he does not take days off. The man was 44 years old but looked to us about 60. He was skinny, looked malnourished and extremely fatigued. He had a 15-month-old baby and wife with him. The three of them lived in a small hut, made up of raw bricks, next to where he was working. As he was making dough, he was sweating. The work he was doing was not necessarily skilled, and seemed very much like working in agricultural field. Both he and his wife make bricks, and his wife works to dry them and stack them. Apart from making bricks, he also carries bricks to the kiln to earn more money. Before coming to work in the brick kiln in Kathmandu, he used to work in Pokhara, carrying and loading sand for construction. Although he was able to earn more money in his previous work, he came to work in the kiln because the family can live and work together as a production unit. Both he and his wife get work, and the work is on a piece basis so there is no wage difference for men and women. In our conversation we learned that a couple may make 1,500–2,000 bricks per day, i.e., around 10,000 bricks per week, which earns around 7,000 rupees per week but only if they work every single day from morning to evening. By living together and working together as a family, they can make more money and look after their children while working, which is not possible in other work settings. (Fieldnotes, Sharma, Kathmandu, May 2012)*

*During our fieldwork in Delhi, we went to meet migrants working (and living) in a momo (dumpling) restaurant, which was located inside a small dark lane close to an elite neighborhood. It was around 9*

*am in the morning, and it had not opened for business. The takeaway restaurant was located on the ground floor of the building and it served momos, noodles, and other similar items. There were a couple of rented rooms on the second floor of the building where the workers, all of them from mid-western Nepal, lived and worked. The owner, who was also a Nepali from the same region, had been bringing workers from the same area since he began his business about 12 years ago. As we climbed the stairs and made it to the second floor, there were three young boys chopping onions and cabbage in large quantities to prepare momos in a very dark, wet, and humid room, and one of them was washing the cooking utensils from the previous day. It was extremely hot with no ventilation, and the boys were sweating. On the left side was a room with several beds on the floor, covered by unarranged bed sheets. These boys worked and lived there, and mostly there was no life beyond working in this kitchen for them except for the occasional trip to the nearby shop to purchase onions, vegetables, and other grocery items, or to watch films once in a while. These boys worked for long hours, started to work as early as 7am in the morning and continued to work till 11pm or 12am, and there was no weekend or time off for them. They woke up in the morning, cleaned the kitchen, washed all the utensils, brought large quantities of vegetables and other supplies from a wholesale shop, did all the preparatory work including chopping and making momos, and 1–2 of them delivered the cooked meals to different stalls and homes in the neighborhood. Those who went for home delivery bathed, and wore a clean t-shirt and a cap. These boys earned about INRs (Indian rupees) 2,500–3,000 per month. (Fieldnotes, Sharma, New Delhi, April 2012)*

*In a run-down area of downtown Doha—a neighborhood that will be demolished to make place for the gleaming new city that will host the Soccer World Cup in 2022—we visited three young (18–20-year-old) migrants from the Langtang area who were camping on the roof of a derelict hostel for migrant workers. They had arrived in Qatar two months earlier and found that their working conditions, salary, and accommodation were not what they had been promised. They had protested, and their sponsor had thrown them out on the street with*

no salary, no exit permit, and no passport. They had been surviving thanks to canned food and other items provided by an unofficial Nepali self-help group and some foreign benefactors. They had no money (and had taken out large loans from moneylenders in their village) and no way of leaving Qatar. The Nepali embassy had been approached but seemed ineffective in addressing the case. They were stuck. Getting exit papers was going to take time. They were dirty, tired, depressed, and hopeless. When asked what would happen when, eventually, they would make their way back to Nepal, they said that in addition to the loss of face of having been unsuccessful in their migration attempt, they would somehow have to pay back 120,000 to 160,000 NPRs (Nepali rupees) each. The only solution would be for their family to sell whatever land they still had. (Fieldnotes, Donini, Doha, December 2012)

*I went towards molders' hut where a few women and children were resting outside. They were expecting to go home either tomorrow or the day after, and worried whether their accounts would be settled today. I began to talk to the contractor's wife, who got married about a year ago. It was her first experience working in the kiln. She had known about her husband's work in the kiln but said, "I never knew that it would be so tough." She said, "This tough labor will decrease one's life by four years." If she can, she will never come again to make bricks although she is not sure whether her husband can leave this work. She said, "It is like 24 hours' work here, we start making bricks from 1am till 5–6am in the morning, drying them during the day, stacking in a row in the evening and then mixing clay for the next day. You won't be free anytime either in the day or in the night." They used to have a day off every ninth day. She is also pregnant and couldn't get any rest. But she says that she can get money from her husband for her expenses. As we were talking, her husband came and scolded her for sitting and talking to me, saying, "Talai hakimni bannuparne?" (literally, "Are you the manager here?") He ordered her to go to their hut and bring the sacho (brick making mold), buckets, and other things to return to the owner. She just stood up and headed towards her hut. Her husband didn't like that her wife talked to me. I explained to him about*

*the purpose of the visit. He said, "Who works makes good money and who cannot work won't make money" and left the scene. (Fieldnotes, Sanjaya, Lalitpur, May 2012)*

Our report starts with these four instances of social suffering that we encountered in our fieldwork on the experiences of Nepali migrant workers. Although the current debate on labor migration is dominated by the issue of remittances and their developmental impact, our aim in this research is to document social suffering among different types of migrants and locate their experiences in the wider context of social transformation in Nepal. While the discussion on migration and its impact on poverty alleviation and development is very important, we cannot ignore the exploitative conditions under which such gains are made and the visible suffering of migrant workers in terms of despair, bodily harm, discrimination, and death.

Before we proceed further we should clarify what this report is about. Our research is about the experiences of marginal migrants, both within Nepal and internationally, with a focus on structural violence and social suffering during recruitment as well as in the work processes. Our goal is not to say that migrants are just victims of exploitation, but to highlight some of the critical issues that often go missing in the discussion on mobility of labor, which has been dominated by either discourses around remittances or the portrayal of migrants as voiceless victims. This research has a limited scope and does not intend to offer a comprehensive understanding of all aspects of the migration experience in Nepal.

Our approach is to treat all the forms of mobility under the same framework rather than treating internal and international migration as distinct analytical domains. Our focus is on the decisions migrants make and the choices available to them that result in migration to different destinations, both within and outside Nepal. Treating different forms of migration with the same analytical lens helps us to understand better the choices migrants make not only on whether to

migrate or not, but more importantly on where to migrate based on the information and different forms of capital (i.e., social, economic, or cultural) they acquire and that are accessible to them. In our research, we found that individual migrants often moved to several destinations, both internally and outside of Nepal, in search of work opportunities and livelihoods.

As our previous research has highlighted,<sup>1</sup> one of the significant transformations in the political economy of rural Nepal is the gradual weakening of traditional forms of attached and caste-based division of labor. Not only have we seen the diversification of rural livelihoods from land- and agriculture-based to non-agricultural- and non-land-based sources, there is also widespread mobility of labor within and outside the country. Mobility ranges from commuting for day labor from the village to nearby areas and seasonal mobility to cities or across the border to India, to organized migration to the Gulf and beyond. Overall, mobility has resulted in massive processes of commodification of labor. Whether working as construction workers, in brick kilns, or as domestic workers or migrant workers in India or in other global destinations such as the Gulf States and Malaysia, rural men, and an increasing number of women, are out-migrating to sectors of the economy that operate outside the rural and agrarian sectors. For most, the choice is not about whether to migrate or not, but it is about where to migrate. We explore questions such as: What does “mobility” mean for the laboring population? What is the experience of migration—both for those who leave and those who stay behind? Despite known risks, what drives labor migration to different destinations—why do people continue to provide “consent” for their own exploitation or social suffering?

Our research is based on extensive fieldwork in rural areas of out-migration and in urban areas of in-migration in Kathmandu, New Delhi, and Qatar. Using the analytical framework of structural violence, symbolic violence, and social suffering, our research explores the experiences

of laboring populations from rural Nepal whose desire for freedom and a better life in new sectors of employment, in urban areas or abroad, has been met with social suffering and exploitation. We found that although the shift from “fields” to “cities” does indicate a change in the position of the laboring population from “subjects” to “citizens,” the movement away from the rural and agrarian sectors, where caste-based and other forms of structural and symbolic violence are believed to be embedded, has not itself been free of structural violence and social suffering. This movement has not been from “unfreedom” to “freedom.” Although the idea of freedom appears to be driving much of the out-migration from rural Nepal, mobility and wage labor often lead to contradictory class mobility; i.e., while migration has certainly opened up opportunities for cash income, the nature of the work and the working conditions have often resulted in social dislocation, humiliation, debt entrapment, social suffering, and structural violence. In many ways, one could argue that the structural violence and social suffering that migrants experience in the destination is just an extension of what they aspire to escape from in rural villages of Nepal. The paradox is that young migrants escape from semi-feudal or bonded conditions in the village and then find themselves in equally exploitative, if not semi-feudal, working conditions in the migratory process and in the destination.

The informal sector, where migrants mainly work, offers very little social or legal protection. Migrants are the victims of various forms of exploitative structures both in the procedures of organizing the migration and in the workplace. Although experiences and working conditions vary, most migrants work in the informal sector, which remains under-monitored, under-regulated, casualized, and without access to any official social protection whatsoever. Officially sanctioned migration to the Gulf or other countries is highly organized but equally exploitative. It relies on informal networks of agents and brokers at the village level that are often based on family/kinship relationships. These networks are connected to globalized and government-sanctioned organizations that

<sup>1</sup> J. R. Sharma, and A. Donini, 2012, “From Subjects to Citizens? Labor, Mobility and Social Transformation in Rural Nepal,” Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, <http://sites.tufts.edu/feinstein/2012/from-subjects-to-citizens>.



manage large numbers of migrants to fulfill the quotas agreed through bilateral agreements between the Nepali state and the recipient country.

### ***Purpose of the Study***

The primary objective of the study was to document, understand, and explain the changing forms of labor in post-conflict Nepal. We were particularly interested in understanding the drivers of bonded and other modern forms of “unfree” labor in various sectors of work and employment and how these are influenced by wider processes of social transformation that are shaping Nepali society, politics, and the economy. The study was composed of two distinct phases. Our 2012 research on changing forms of labor exploitation (Phase I) analyzed changing practices at the village and local level from the perspective of individuals and communities at the lower end of the socio-economic scale and the decisions they make to improve their human condition. The current report (Phase II) takes the analysis of the political economy of vulnerability among the laboring population to the experience of mobility at the national and international levels. Building on the earlier findings, this report focuses on the findings of Phase II. Both phases were financed by a generous grant from Humanity United.

We look for similarities and differences between “old” and “new” forms of labor, with a particular emphasis on work processes and the recruitment of labor, and how these processes shape the lives and livelihoods of the laboring population, which includes *Dalits* and other impoverished caste and ethnic groups. We pay particular attention to the social, economic, and other pressures that affect the decision-making and organization of laborers, with an aim to understanding why some people end up in exploitative relations/conditions, and others do not.

We distinguish between forms of exploitative labor as they existed in traditional Nepali rural society and contemporary forms of labor in various branches of the economy (e.g., service,

construction, manufacturing sectors, etc). Our approach is not to treat bonded and other forms of unfree labor arrangements as separate from a broader analysis related to the whole landscape of employment of Nepalis in and outside the country, including the experience of Nepali migrants and those trafficked to India and the Gulf States. On the basis of earlier work in this field and the findings of our own research, we can safely affirm that the emergence of new forms of labor exploitation is strongly connected to the intensification of both external and internal migration, and to the increased monetization of commodity exchanges and of social relationships.

### ***Key Research Questions***

By focussing on the experiences of poorer migrants, the research aims to identify and explain the range of “exploitative” forms of labor that are prevalent in Nepal and in the experience of migration:

- What is the nature of changes in labor practices in contemporary Nepal? How might we explain the changes in labor practices, and their meanings for the individuals concerned?
- To what extent have labor practices shifted from “feudal relations” in rural and agricultural settings (including bonded laborers) to market-mediated “class” relations in urban, non-agricultural, and out-migration settings, and has this process reduced the vulnerabilities of the rural poor?
- How has migration, both external and internal, contributed to the transition from “feudal” to “commodified” labor practices?
- What do different types of “mobility” mean for the laboring population? What is the subjective experience of migration?
- Despite known risks, what drives labor migration to different destinations—why do people continue to provide “consent” for their own exploitation or social suffering?

Our starting assumption, based on a review of the literature, as well as our own earlier work on perceptions of change,<sup>2</sup> is that (rural) Nepal is on

<sup>2</sup> J. R. Sharma, and A. Donini, 2012, “From Subjects to Citizens? Labor, Mobility and Social Transformation in Rural Nepal,” Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, <http://sites.tufts.edu/feinstein/2012/from-subjects-to-citizens>.

the cusp of a major “transformation” from a relatively stable condition of reproduction of social and economic relations based on feudal and caste strictures to a more fluid and open condition where the old “order” is changing, if not collapsing, and a new order or disorder is emerging. Individuals and their livelihoods, even in the most remote areas, are increasingly affected by variables such as cash-based employment, the circulation of labor, the incorporation of the rural economy into globalized flows, and the commodification of labor and land, to name but a few.

While there is anecdotal evidence of the transformations highlighted above, there have as yet been no field-based studies of the impact of such changes for the overall vulnerabilities of the rural and urban poor as well as on caste, gender, and other forms of discrimination. In this sense, our research aims to open new and important ground. Although some of the big-picture issues affecting life in rural areas are known—for example, the massive increase in external migration and remittances (with about 10 percent of the Nepali population outside the country at any given time), the emergence of a cash economy and cash crops, advances in education, access to health, transport, and communications—our understanding of who are the winners and losers and of the livelihoods strategies employed by individuals and communities is very sketchy at best.

By looking at the changes in labor arrangements (Phase I) and extending the research to internal and international migration (Phase II), our field research captures the perceptions of changes of those involved and the meanings ascribed to these changes. Our research provides a view from below that allows for a better understanding and conceptualization of ongoing transformations in Nepali society and the risks and opportunities that vulnerable groups are facing in this process.

### ***Conceptual Framework***

We will now briefly discuss five different concepts (mobility, livelihoods, social

transformation, structural violence, and symbolic violence) as a means to explore the research questions discussed above. We bring together our fieldwork-based empirical evidence and these concepts to address the research questions.

**Mobility:** Following Sharma,<sup>3</sup> we find that it is helpful to move beyond the existing categories of migration if we are to capture different forms of mobility decisions from the perspective of aspiring migrants. Existing literature deals with different forms of mobility separately. It is either characterized by the length of time involved (seasonal, cyclical, permanent, temporary), or in terms of distance (internal, international), or in terms of spatial direction (rural-urban, urban-rural, rural-rural), or in terms of motivation (voluntary, forced), or in terms of history (pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial) and so on. Treating migration within these categories offers little possibility to examine different migration choices available to migrants from different backgrounds. Further, considering mobility as a frame of reference allows us to examine the questions of exploitation, freedom, structural violence, and suffering across different forms of mobility. We maintain that the concept of mobility enables us to explore the commonality and differences in these, and see how these different forms of mobility and associated processes of suffering are connected to each other. Understanding mobility from people’s perspective allows one to explore a more complex picture than what is often taken for granted as the clear and defined categories of migration. Above all, treating different forms of mobility under a single framework opens an opportunity to uncover political agendas in the existing authoritative discourses that a priori conceptualize some forms of mobility as better than others.

**Livelihoods:** At the broader level, we are interested in livelihoods, and how people’s livelihoods in Nepal are shaped by wider social transformation. For the purpose of this work we adopt a simple definition of livelihoods—“diverse ways in which people make a living

<sup>3</sup> J. R. Sharma, 2007, “Mobility, Pathology and Livelihoods: An Ethnography of Forms of Mobility in/from Nepal,” Graduate School of Social and Political Studies, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh.

and build their worlds.”<sup>4</sup> It is both about fulfilling biological needs but also about giving meaning to their existence. The search for income or other means through which people can access resources to sustain themselves and their families is a major factor in how people structure their lives and make the decision of whether to move or not and, more importantly, where to move. We view mobility as a part of people’s livelihoods, exploring how their mobility decisions are shaped not only by socio-economic but also by socio-cultural factors, including familial and gender considerations.

**Social Transformation:** We maintain that people’s livelihoods are not of their own making but are shaped by wider forces of social transformation. Following our research program, we are primarily interested in how social transformation in Nepali society is viewed by the people, and whether or not such social transformation has had an impact on the livelihoods of laboring populations beyond the rhetoric of change. We find that the vectors of change that Polanyi<sup>5</sup> applied to his analysis of the “Great Transformation” that accompanied the industrial revolution in Europe provide a useful frame to understand social change in Nepal. These vectors of change are the commodification of land, labor, and money. In rural Nepal, land was where people worked, and labor was what they did. Bonded or exchange-based forms of labor were how one eked out a livelihood, rather than through cash transactions. Now, even remote areas of rural Nepal have witnessed a change from a relatively static situation of reproduction of societal roles to one where land and labor are increasingly bought and sold and where the market economy and globalized economic and social processes (communications, migration, social remittances, outlook on the “outside”) have rapidly taken hold.

**Structural violence:** We have consistently employed the concept of structural violence in our research work to characterize conditions of structural inequalities in Nepali society that result in the systematic exclusion and marginalization of some populations based on their caste, ethnicity, and other forms of identity. According to Farmer, structural violence refers to systematic ways in which social structures disadvantage individuals. Structural violence is subtle and often has no one specific person who can (or will) be held responsible for it. Farmer defines it as “violence exerted systematically—that is indirectly—by everyone who belongs to a certain social order.”<sup>6</sup> The system of social and institutional oppression functions as long as each side, oppressor and oppressed, play their roles according to the rules implanting social suffering and subordination of one to the other. Galtung, another scholar who frequently used the term “structural violence” in relation to conflict studies, defines it as “the indirect violence built into repressive social orders [which] creates enormous differences between potential and actual human self-realization.”<sup>7</sup>

**Symbolic violence:** We draw on the notion of symbolic violence from Pierre Bourdieu to allow us to talk about various modes of socio-cultural violence. He uses the concept of symbolic violence to designate symbolic power exercised by the dominant over the other.<sup>8</sup> Symbolic violence is the unnoticed or naturalized domination that everyday social practice maintains over the conscious subject. One of the key features of the concept is that those who are subjected to symbolic violence are not passive recipients who accept their subjugation as given but are actually complicit in their subjugation. For this reason, the dominated internalize and naturalize domination and do not question or resist it.

<sup>4</sup> A. Bebbington, 1999, “Capitals and Capabilities: A Framework for Analyzing Peasant Viability, Rural Livelihoods and Poverty,” *World Development* 27 (12): 2021–2044, p. 2034.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Polanyi, 2001, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston: Beacon Press.

<sup>6</sup> P. Farmer, 2004, “An Anthropology of Structural Violence,” *Current Anthropology* 45 (3): 305–325, p. 307.

<sup>7</sup> J. Galtung, 1975, *Peace: Research, Education, Action*. Copenhagen: Christian Ejlertsen. p. 173.

<sup>8</sup> P. Bourdieu, 2001, *Masculine Domination*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

### ***Research Design and Methodology***

Our field research first explored the nature of labor arrangements, organization, and relations with a specific focus on rural households and mobility in six different sites in Nepal (see Phase I report). We then built on this study by conducting fieldwork not only in rural Nepal but also following migrants and “trafficked” individuals both within Nepal and to two destinations outside Nepal (India and Qatar). In addition, we interviewed prospective migrants to understand the complex arrangements that link the village to the manpower/recruitment agencies and state-sponsored migration processes. As well, we interviewed aspiring and returning migrants to gain a perspective on their experience.

By conducting in-depth interviews with the subjects themselves and a range of other stakeholders, such as manpower/recruitment agencies and trade union representatives, and by using participant observation in different settings including cities like Kathmandu (looking at brick kilns, and service, manufacturing, and construction sectors), towns and rural areas in Nepal (looking at the service and construction sector), India (domestic work, service sector, etc.) and the Gulf States (construction, agriculture, and service sectors), and other specific sites where various forms of exploitative, bonded labor and trafficking practices are widespread, we document, understand, and explain the nature and practices of labor from the perspective of vulnerability and livelihoods. We analyze the interplay of class, caste, gender, and kinship networks within the ways the workforce is recruited, deployed, and disciplined. The tables in the Annexes provide details of the fieldwork sites and interviewees.

The methodology remained the same as for our earlier research. We have privileged open, one-to-one discussions, where the conversation was allowed to evolve organically, over structured interviews and focus groups. We have found that by conducting in-depth interviews with the subjects themselves and a range of other stakeholders, and by using participant observation in different settings including cities like Kathmandu, rural areas in Nepal, and other specific work sites such as New Delhi and Qatar

where various forms of exploitative, bonded labor and trafficking practices are widespread, we were able to collect rich data that help us to understand and explain the nature and practices of labor and migration from the perspective of the vulnerability and livelihoods of those concerned. Where feasible, we focused on getting “thick” descriptions of working and living conditions of migrant workers through close observation, in-depth interviews, and interaction with migrants.

### ***Management and Organization***

The research was managed by Jeevan Sharma (Centre for South Asian Studies and Department of Social Anthropology, University of Edinburgh) and Antonio Donini (Feinstein International Center, Tufts University), and was a collaborative venture between the two Universities. They were assisted by a team of locally recruited researchers who worked under the oversight and management of the Principal Investigators: Sanjaya Aryal, Keshav Bashyal, and Muna Gautam did the bulk of the fieldwork. Antonio and Jeevan accompanied Sanjaya for the initial fieldwork in the Kathmandu valley and in Sindupalchowk. Antonio and Sanjaya did the interviewing in Qatar, while Jeevan accompanied Keshav for fieldwork in New Delhi and Sanjaya for initial fieldwork in Kathmandu. Sanjaya also played a key role in the write-up and analysis of the field-generated material. Throughout the fieldwork phase, the investigators held teleconferences with all members of the research team, to share information, discuss processes, and address concerns. Running tallies of interviews completed were shared regularly via email, enabling investigators to monitor progress towards completion of the data collection for the project as a whole. Two workshops were held with the Principal Investigators and the research team to compare notes and identify key trends and gaps in the data.

Throughout the project duration, contact was maintained and collaborative approaches sought with Nepali-based institutions working on social transformation issues, in particular with the Social Science Baha and Nepali academics. The work and accumulated experience of NGOs dealing with caste, gender, and other forms of

discrimination was also tapped. Seminars and presentations on emerging issues and the findings of the research were held in Kathmandu, Edinburgh, and Geneva and provided opportunities for cross-fertilization between our research and the work of other research institutions and civil society organizations active in Nepal and in academia elsewhere.

Within FIC, grant management and expenditure tracking was handled by the Grants and Budget Coordinator and the Administrative and Finance Director. The Tufts University Office of Research Administration was responsible for the overall administration of financial aspects for the grant. The University of Edinburgh has a dedicated research administration office called ERI (Edinburgh Research and Innovation). This oversight included ensuring that all researchers had current certificates of completion for the Protection of Human Research Subjects course, sponsored by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI).

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## II. SECTORS OF EMPLOYMENT

As our previous research has highlighted, the transformation in the nature of labor from rural to urban and from agricultural to non-agricultural has not been linear. Because of population growth and pressure on land, it has become progressively almost impossible for laboring households to sustain their livelihoods exclusively from agriculture or from non-land-based wage work. The vast majority of families must therefore draw their livelihoods from both. This takes many forms, ranging from non-agricultural wage labor in construction or trade in the village or neighboring area, to commuting to nearby district centers for day labor, to longer distance mobility within and outside Nepal. Mobility of labor has become a significant and increasing part of the rural political economy. Large numbers of men and an increasing number of women are out-migrating in search of work opportunities within and outside Nepal.

We maintain that there are significant similarities, as well differences, when it comes to internal or international labor migration. For example, there are those who work as construction workers in Nepal and in the Gulf and also in India, and there are those who work as domestic workers in India, Nepal, and the Gulf, and in the service sector such as hotel/restaurants. While the issue of citizenship or lack thereof becomes much more important when one is working in the Gulf or India, which often leads to social dislocation and constraints on personal freedom, those who remain within Nepal remain marginal or unequal citizens.

Except for a few factories that eventually died in the face of global commodity flows, Nepal has largely skipped industrialization. Thus employment opportunities for rural labor have been mostly in the informal service sectors and small-scale processing factories. The poorer sections of the population from rural Nepal end up migrating to nearby towns or cities to work in brick kilns, construction work, domestic work, hotels/restaurants, factories such as carpet and garment, and small-scale manufacturing that exist in and around towns in the Terai. While it is impossible to provide a thorough account of

each of these sectors in this report, we will highlight the work processes and living and working conditions of migrants working in a few of these sectors, with illustrations drawn from our fieldwork. Our aim is to treat these findings as indicative of the subordinate positions of the laboring population in different sectors of the economy.

### **Brick Kiln Workers in Kathmandu Valley**

There are about 700 brick kilns all over Nepal, mostly located on the outskirts of cities and towns, each employing an average of 300–500 workers. It is estimated that in the Kathmandu valley alone there are more than 150 brick kilns and at least 400 workers in each kiln. The brick kiln industry, which involves molding and firing of clay bricks, employs a large number of men, women, and children. Workers in the brick kilns, almost all of whom are seasonal migrants from rural areas, constitute one of the poorest and weakest sections of the laboring population. Most of the workers in the brick kilns in the Kathmandu valley come from adjoining districts of Kathmandu and also from poorer areas of the mid-western hills.

The production of bricks is directly related to demand in the construction sector. Because of the boom in the housing sector in the Kathmandu valley in the last decade and a half, the brick kilns are also thriving. The work is seasonal, i.e., the production of bricks starts before the winter (around October and November) and stops before the monsoon/rainy season (around April and May) for about 5 to 7 months a year and is labor-intensive. Although a small number of workers are employed during the off-season, it is the production period when there is a high demand of migrant laborers from different parts of the country and even from bordering districts of India.

The workers in the brick kilns not only represent the poorest and weakest sections of the laboring populations; they are also susceptible to low pay, difficult and unhealthy working conditions, and exploitation. The wage rates and minimum



Left: “Chit” used to record the loads of bricks carried by each migrant worker. Right: Migrant worker having his “chit” stamped after carrying a load of bricks, brick kiln, Kathmandu Valley

wages do not really reflect the degree of exploitation of the workers in the kiln, bearing in mind that the child and women workers often remain as the invisible workforce.

### **Work Processes and Division of Labor**

Brick making is a low-technology industry that is not only labor intensive but is also characterized by a distinct division of labor. Starting from the molding up to the extraction and storage and dispatching of baked bricks from the kiln, the division of labor may be broadly categorized as fivefold:

**Molding:** This activity employs the largest number of laborers in the kiln. The job requires preparing the pits, digging the clay, making the dough by continuously sprinkling water on the clay, and using hands and feet to shape the rounds of mud into bricks with the help of wooden mold provided by the brick kiln owner. After the bricks are molded, they are carried to be spread out in the sun and turned on all sides for even drying. Once they are dry, they must be piled up so they can be picked up by the next set of workers who carry them to the kiln. Molders are quick to pile the dried bricks as they are not liable for any damage after the bricks have been piled. However, if the bricks are damaged by rain before they are dry, they get no compensation. The molders are the largest

concentration of workers and they come at the start of the season, in the months of October/ November. A month later, the other categories of workers follow. The molders’ job is labor intensive and forms the base of the kiln. The pace at which the kiln will operate, the number of rounds of firing that the kiln will make in a season, and the optimization of production all depend on the speed at which the molders work. Depending on the demand for bricks at the baking site or in the market, molders are expected to provide flexible labor and deliver accordingly.

Often, but not always, family units work together in the molding. When family units are involved, one can clearly see a gendered and generational division of labor. The able-bodied men sprinkle water on the clay prepared the previous evening into dough. They knead it with their feet to make it more pliable and children often join in that job. After the dough is ready the women hand over the lumps of wet clay and the men shape them into bricks with the help of a wooden mold provided by the kiln owner. The prepared bricks are kept on wooden planks also provided by the owner. The women and the children work alongside, and that is how the children too learn their work and grow up to be molders themselves. Then the women and the children take the molded bricks to dry in the sun

while the man continues to mold. The bricks have to be turned on all sides for even drying. Women and children too do this work. Where family units are not available, 2–3 laborers get together and form a production unit.

**Loading kaccha (unbaked) bricks (or carrying with donkeys):** The job requires carrying the unbaked dried bricks from the molding and drying site to the kilns. The workers may carry the bricks on their backs using ropes or use donkeys or a cart. The workers carrying the bricks are covered in a heavy layer of dust from the unbaked bricks. This is often called the “donkey job” in the kiln. In the kilns in Kathmandu, this job was mainly done by the workers from the mid-western hills, although workers from other parts of Nepal also carried bricks to the kiln.

**Brick baking at the kiln:** Here the work involves arranging the bricks in the kiln for firing, stacking them with earth and making them ready for the baking process, and firing the kiln and watching continuously to ensure that the bricks are being properly baked. This specialized task is done by a different category of workers. Many of the experienced master bakers come from India.

**Unloading pakka (baked) bricks:** A different set of workers take out the hot baked bricks from the kilns and sort and stack them according to the quality of the bricks. Men, women, and children are involved in this work.

**Dispatching:** There is another category of workers called loaders who only load the trucks carrying the bricks to the market/clients.

In Kathmandu, we found that molding is done mostly but not always by workers in family units from nearby districts such as Kavrepalanchowk, Sindhupalchowk, Sindhuli, Ramechhap, and Makwanpur. The brick-loading job is done by workers, usually men, from mid-western hilly districts such as Rolpa, Rukum, Salyan, Pyuthan, and Dang. The brick-baking job or the kiln work is done by workers from Darbhanga district, Bihar, India, and the unloading of pakka bricks is done by women, men, and children from Darbhanga, India. Dispatching is done by

both Nepali and Indian workers, both men and women.

The work in the kilns is divided in such a way that different groups do not have contact/communication with each other and usually come from different parts of the country. There is no upward mobility, as the laborers do not learn any specific skills working at the kiln, and also there is no room for promotion to higher positions.

There are accountants, hired by the kiln owners, who maintain the accounts, which includes payment of advances to the contractors. Advances are made through the contractor on a weekly basis to the workers for their living expenses. These accountants also supervise the work, and make payment to *chowkidars* (guards) who keep a watch over the bricks and their makers.

Labor contractors or *naikes* are important actors not only in the recruitment of the labor but also in the discipline and the supervision of the labor force in the kiln. Often but not always, the *naikes* are of two categories—one is the contractor of molders and the other is a contractor for other tasks. Where Indian workers are involved, they often have an Indian contractor.

### ***Recruitment of Labor***

The workers come to work in the kilns through a middleman or contractor called a *naike*. The recruitment is accompanied by payment of advances by the kiln owner through the *naike* to the workers for a specified period of employment, i.e., usually for a season. An individual or an entire family (excluding old, disabled, and dependent persons) comprising husband, wife, and children may be recruited to the brick kilns and work as one unit for the full season of the operating kiln. It is the social network that sustains the recruitment of laborers from certain source areas to the brick kilns in Kathmandu. Very often the *naike* also comes from the same locality/district as the workers do.

The recruitment of the labor force through the *naike* is arranged through a system of advance payment called *peshki*. The workers are provided with *peshki* through the *naike* before they join the

work—they take the amount either during the lean period (starting from the monsoon season, when they need some money to celebrate the harvest festival of Dashain) or before leaving the village to travel to the kiln. The amount varies from NRs 2,000 to 20,000 for loaders and unloaders and NRs 50,000 to 100,000 for molders where a family unit is involved. The *naike's* role is to arrange and supply a labor force to the kiln, supervise them, and settle the workers' financial accounts. A few *naikes*, especially *naikes* of the molders, may bring their family to work while simultaneously working as *naike*.

The *peshki* plays both a positive and negative role for the laborers. On the one hand, the laborers get money in advance that they can use to meet their needs in the village; on the other hand, they fall into the trap of bondedness because of the advance payment. It is this advance payment that helps the *naike* ensure a smooth supply of laborers in the next session.

The transportation cost (one way) is paid separately by the *naike* to the workers. If a worker wishes to leave mid-term, he has to return the balance of the advance. Workers leave mid-term for various reasons. The most common is that there is not enough work at the kiln. Therefore, because they are paid on a piece basis, it is to the workers' advantage to move to bigger kilns. The labor agents of nearby kilns are always on the lookout for workers and, depending on the demand of each, kiln workers are lured away from one kiln to the other. The new recruiting agent then has to clear the advance due to the previous labor agent. This payment is not made directly by one labor agent to another but paid through the worker involved in the switch. Other reasons for leaving are: better living conditions offered at alternative sites, disputes with the labor agent over wages and adjustments against advance, or personal reasons.

The *naike* can negotiate his rate of commission with the owners and he can choose the owners or the brick kiln for the following year based on his perceived benefits. But the workers don't have freedom to choose their place of work themselves as they have to work under the *naike*, and the owners also avoid dealing with

individual workers and prefer dealing with the *naike* as a group leader.

### **System of Payment**

Most workers, if not all, who work in the brick kilns have taken an advance payment through their *naike*. While the advance payment often attracts workers to the kilns, it also forces them to work hard not only to repay the loan but also to earn money to escape from this bondage in future. Work in the brick kilns is organized on a piece-rate basis, and there is a fixed rate per thousand bricks for the different kinds of work.

The payment for the work is made either at the beginning as an advance payment or at the end of work as a final payment. No apparent interest is charged on the advance made to the workers. The workers' record of work is updated on a weekly basis (during the weekly day-off day), and they are provided with a certain amount on a weekly basis for their subsistence called *haphta*. These amounts do not match up to the value of their work and the wages that are due to them in accordance with what they have produced. They receive only about one fourth of their wages on a regular basis. The money given to them towards expenses and the advance that they have taken are both deducted at the end of the season when the final payment is made. In a way, the owners and the contractors hold the workers back until they have earned enough to pay back the advance and the amount that they have been given as expenses. It is not easy for the workers to leave the kiln as and when they wish to look for better or alternative work opportunities.

The wages are fixed every year between owners and contractors. The contractors and the workers raise their demands every year in the middle of the season, and negotiation begins. The raised amount is paid at the end of the season from the day it is made effective, which leaves maximum room for the owner's manipulation. The workers join at the previous year's wage rates and have no say in the negotiation of the rates.

Workers exploitation begins from the day they sign up to work. As mentioned, most workers are paid on piece rate per thousand bricks. The owners, as well as the *naikes* and the system of wages, give the impression that a worker earns a



lot as one can prepare or carry x thousand bricks in a day. However, their hypothetical mathematical calculations fail, as they do not take into account the number of hours they put into work, days off for illness and other reasons, and the suffering they go through.

The piece-rate system hides the necessary labor time and the variations in the strength of the team, and also the contribution of invisible workers, in particular the children. The minimum wages earned therefore are in total divergence from what sounds fine as per thousand rates.

The earnings from the brick kilns are for a period of six to seven months depending on the nature of work. For example, the molders work from November till May and the others all come a month later when substantial number of bricks have been molded and are ready to be stacked and fired. At the end of the season, when the workers go home, they often find that they are left with just the money to pay for their travel back home with the family and no more after deducting the advance and what they had been given for their survival for the months that they have worked. The difference between what they have earned and the amount that they settle with the owner and the contractor gives them the extra earnings with which they hope to go back to the village and manage their expenses, along with earnings from the village, until it is time for their return to the kiln. Those who are left with no difference take an advance from the contractor with the promise of returning the next season. Some, as we will see, also seek casual labor in India during the months when they are not working in the kilns. The contractors negotiate from a different economic position, but often hail from the same village. The workers mentioned that even if they wanted to run away from the oppressive working conditions and labor relations they did not wish to embarrass the contractor who is one of their own, and they can resort to him for loans when they need to, back in the village.

### ***Working and Living Conditions***

Located in the outskirts of the city or market areas, the brick kiln is a particular kind of place that has a “camp-like,” temporary feel. It is a

place where workers live and work day and night, and are continuously under the surveillance of their supervisors. There is very little separation between private and public life in these kilns. It is possible to see the workers carrying bricks, molding, baking, and even cooking, washing, sleeping, and playing at the same time.

As mentioned earlier, the laborers work on contract and piece basis. Hence, the people who are strong enough carry more or work more and can make more money than the others. Therefore, it is very easy for the workers to self-exploit themselves. The molders, loaders, and unloaders work normally for 12–14 hours daily with between half and a full day off per week.

There are no workplace standards when it comes to working in brick kilns. The work does not offer bonus or provident funds, maternity leave, protective gear, gratuity, or medical benefits. Workers are not compensated for days when work stops because of rain or for some other reason.

All implements are provided by the owners. The molders pay for their own gas lights and also bring their own implements for digging; there is no electricity; no facility for communication in case of emergency such as phone; no crèche; no separate rest room; no toilets. There is no drainage facility; no open space for cooking. Workers and their children are exposed to the fumes of the kiln day and night. The molders make their own shelters using the unbaked bricks they have prepared. Workers live in very small rooms on a shared basis, and tend to cook and eat in small groups of 3–5. Workers look extremely fatigued, dusty, and sweaty. Their diet is not particularly nourishing. Their regular meal tends to be rice and potato curry, supplemented with lentils and meat on an occasional basis. There is no supplementary nutritious meal for children.

The day starts early for the kiln workers. They may start as early as 5 am, and take a break for lunch for 1–2 hours, and then work again until late evening. When the family is working as a production unit, the woman finishes the cooking



and washing early so that she can join her husband in molding or carrying the bricks. If there is a young daughter, she may help the mother in cooking, and the mother can help in breaking the clots of earth too. After the clay has been worked, the woman hands over the lumps of mud, and the man shapes them into bricks with the help of a wooden mold provided by the kiln owner. He puts the prepared bricks on wooden planks also provided by the owners to dry. The women and the children work alongside, and that is how the children too pick up the skills to become molders themselves. The morning shift is up to 2 pm. After a break for lunch, the work is resumed in the afternoon. Before retiring for the day, the earth is dug and dough is prepared for the next day's work.

Women and children supervise the water channel while the men dig the earth with a shovel. At 6 pm the man relaxes, smoking and talking to his friends or just sitting on a quilt in front of his hut, while the woman gets busy with the cooking of the evening meal and sleeps only after she has served the food and washed the utensils. Our fieldwork shows that very often the workers carry on until 10:00 or 10:30 pm, having started at 5:00 in the morning, with an hour's rest for lunch.

The workers spend the income from the brick kiln mainly to cover day-to-day expenses. Apart from this, these days, young men and women may spend their money on buying a mobile phone. A few workers also collect and remit the money for renovating their house back in the village or buying a solar electric system. The workers have a half-day off every week in which they use their time for washing and recreation (playing sports, visiting places, shopping, watching movies).

The unpaid labor component is quite high for the workers. Molders arrive first at the kiln and the other categories of workers join a month later. Not only does the worker have to build a dwelling place in his own time, but also has to select a suitable place where the clay can be dug and prepare it by clearing all vegetation, stones, and foreign matter so that the clay is as fine as possible for the best results in brick-making. No payment is made for this work.

In the beginning, for about a week, the workers have to sustain themselves with the advance money paid to them back in the village. The workers also need to travel to purchase supplies or in case of ill health when no payment is made. Working hours are lost during winter rains, not to mention other work stoppages arbitrarily decided by kiln owners or dictated by a reduction in demand for bricks.

The workers keep worksheets where they maintain an account of how many bricks they have produced or carried during the day. Most of them are illiterate and depend on the contractor or accountant to stamp the sheet to account for their day's work.

Overall, our fieldwork amongst the brick kiln workers shows that they are susceptible not only to difficult and exploitative working conditions but also to conditions that cause social dislocation, humiliation, debt entrapment, suffering, and structural violence. *First*, the payment structure that is organized on a piece rate per thousand forces the workers to self-exploit themselves. The desire to earn more money leads workers to over-work, which causes ill health and suffering. *Second*, the workers are organized into different categories and small production units. They are expected to perform specialized tasks and are under constant surveillance by the contractors or accountants. This offers very little social interaction and contributes to social dislocation. Moreover, because of the division of labor and different areas of origin of the different categories of workers, there is little ground for expression of common grievances or resistance. *Third*, the work at the brick kiln does not offer any new skills or possibility of social mobility for the workers, as there is no possibility of promotion or upward mobility in the job. *Fourth*, the working conditions in the brick kilns are unhealthy, often dangerous, and nowhere close to any workplace standards. *Fifth*, the system of advance payment is the basis for the exploitation and bondage of the workers. It is key not only for the continued recruitment of the workers but also to produce workers' consent to work under cheap labor and exploitative conditions.

## Domestic Workers

*“It was as tough as chewing stones.”*

(Female caregiver returning from Israel,  
interviewed in Kathmandu)

Although we did not conduct specific fieldwork amongst domestic workers in Kathmandu, interviews with NGOs and trade unions provided us with a picture of the types of exploitative labor arrangements for domestic workers. One particularly common practice is “domestic work in exchange for going to school.” We were able to observe such practices in Helambu where one frequently sees young girls, sometimes as young as ten, usually from poor Tamang or Bahun families, working as servants in Sherpa/Hyolmo Lama households or guesthouses. Household chores are done in exchange for access to school. Ethical constraints precluded interviews with these subjects, and it is unclear to what extent the practices actually do promote schooling or are abusive. In Kathmandu, however, we were able to interview two female aspiring migrants who had previously worked as domestic workers for families in Kathmandu. Both had been sent by their parents to work for a family from the same village living in Kathmandu in exchange for schooling. They had started at around age ten. One had had a positive experience working for a supportive family that allowed her to continue her education; the chores had not been too onerous. The other had had a less positive experience: chores were heavy and interfered with schooling and the family tried (unsuccessfully) to force the young girl into an arranged marriage.

The point here is the continued existence of semi-feudal bonded relationships that involve child labor even in areas that are rapidly becoming globalized (new roads and marketed goods, including vegetables from Kathmandu, were visible in many hitherto remote villages that we visited). An interesting observation is the stratified nature of aspirations; Tamang families send their children to work for Sherpa families in the area or in Kathmandu, where in a sense they remain beholden to ethnic relations of subordination. Sherpa/Hyolmo families aspire to send their daughters abroad as domestic workers or carers—the most sought-after destinations

being Lebanon and Israel—if not to study in western universities. For example, in neighboring villages in Helambu, we found that two guesthouse owners—relatively well-off and, because of their trade, accustomed to dealing with foreigners—had sent their children to prestigious universities in London and California.

The “domestic work for school” arrangement is widespread in Kathmandu and other urban areas. The practice of sending young girls (and some boys) to work as servants in the cities is of course not new, but the education twist is relatively new. These arrangements tend to peter out when girls reach puberty. Girls then either return to their villages or enter the equally, if not more, exploitative restaurant and hotel service sector. This is a sector in which it is notoriously difficult to conduct research and one in which trafficking is also frequent. On the bus from Kathmandu to Melamchi, a Tamang lady spontaneously told us about a recent incident in her village. From our fieldnotes:

*An agent from Kathmandu had tried to sell some 14–15 young girls from her village in India. She knew two of the girls (distant relatives). They were literate but they didn’t know why the person was taking them to India. They were told they would have a good, easy job in India. The agent had already taken a few girls to India earlier in two lots and this time he was trying to take more girls. He was caught at the India-Nepal border and now he is in the police custody. The ladies were rescued from the border by an NGO and were now living and getting some vocational training in Kathmandu. They were not staying in the village (it seems that they were facing a problem of rehabilitation into their family and village). She also said that people do not have a good view towards the girls coming back from Bombay because they are suspected of being sex workers, so they often stay in Kathmandu after their return. (Fieldnotes, Melamchi, May 2012)*

We were able to collect information on direct experiences of domestic labor abroad through interviews with returning female migrants or with aspiring repeat migrants waiting for their papers/visa in guesthouses in Kathmandu. Given the small number of interviews (12), these can hardly be considered as a representative sample,

but they do give some idea of the types of situations encountered. The experiences recorded range from the broadly positive to downright abusive.

Two young women had worked as maids for families in Lebanon and had found this to be a generally positive experience, with reasonable working conditions that corresponded to what they had been told before their departure. While the hours may have been long, the conditions were not abusive, and salary was paid on time. Personal movements were however very limited: in both cases the maids were never allowed to leave the house on their own, allegedly for their own protection, and had no contact with other Nepali migrants during their stay. Their “owner” (as one young woman referred to her employer) would accompany them to the shopping mall when they wanted to call their family back home. Experience of women working as carers for the elderly or disabled in Israel was similar; although the pay was higher, so was the exploitation, with long hours and hardly any time off.

While the working conditions are more predictable and access to recourse is easier, the cost of migrating to Israel (and the same applies to Malaysia and South Korea) is higher than for other destinations. One young woman had to take out a loan of NRs 500,000 for the manpower agency and related costs (at an interest rate of 60 percent per year). As the salary was good, she was able to pay back her creditors in 15 months. Nonetheless, expressions of suffering were always close to the surface. A young woman returning from Israel after two years as a caregiver expressed it as follows: *“My sorrow is impossible to show, my heart is full of it. Bidesh ma kam garnu ra dhunga ko cheura chabaunu malai yautai lagyo.”* (*It was as tough as chewing stones*). On the plus side, she had two million NRs remaining after paying all her debts. So, she had bought a piece of land and built a small house in her village. Her two children were also studying in a good school. Now she said that she would never go for migration anywhere. *“If I had already known about the sorrows I had to go through in Israel, I would have never gone there.”*

Interviewees who had been to Israel and Lebanon had often worked hard and experienced suffering but also positive outcomes. Not so, however, in the Gulf. Despite the Nepali restrictions in place to protect young women (minimum age of 30) and the ban on migration to certain countries (Saudi Arabia), many women seem prepared to accept the known risks and sometimes find themselves in extraordinarily abusive situations. The desire for a better life is such that, in order to escape these restrictions, young girls and women place their confidence in a chain of intermediaries, often starting with a relative in the village, that involves more or less bogus manpower agencies based in India and their counterparts in the destination countries. There is not even the minimal protection provided by registered manpower agencies based in Nepal and therefore no recourse when salary and working conditions turn out to be very different from what was promised.

Among the small number (less than ten) of returnees from migrating to the Gulf, only two had had relatively positive experiences (one of them was working for an Indian family in Saudi Arabia and had moved from housework to driving the family’s car; the other worked on a farm). The others suffered from varying levels of physical and psychological abuse. One was pushed down the stairs of the house she was working in by her employer because she had complained to the Nepali embassy about her working conditions—and this had caused a loss of face for the employer—and had to be repatriated in a semi-unconscious state with permanent disabilities. Two women had to flee their employers’ home by escaping down the drainpipe and tying their sheets together in a rope because they were not only abused physically but also kept in conditions akin to slavery.

Another woman was repeatedly raped for weeks by the son of her employers who refused to do anything about the situation until it was clear she was pregnant—at which point they handed her over to the manpower agency from which she had been recruited. She eventually returned to Nepal with her child, no savings, and a number of debts to repay, not to mention the social stigma she would be facing. She was staying in

an NGO shelter in Kathmandu: *“While boarding the plane for the first time, I was much afraid thinking what would happen to me in bidesh (migration abroad). But at the back of my mind I was optimistic that I would get a good job, would be able to earn a lot of money, that I could invest for educating my children and in building a small house.”* Now her one and only hope is that someone will adopt her child and that she could then be with her family who knows nothing about her situation. To be with her family is her ultimate destination.

The following excerpt from a long interview with a young woman who had migrated via India to Kuwait, and who was waiting in Kathmandu for her papers in order to legally migrate to Dubai, gives an idea of the risks and problems encountered.

*In my village, I heard that many people including girls were migrating to Gulf countries. One “Aunty” (a woman from the neighborhood) motivated me to migrate to the Gulf and said that one of the manpower companies is sending girls in good companies. She showed the manpower company to me and we went there and gathered information. I became interested to migrate as the company person said that there is a very good work opportunity in Kuwait where I should work as security person of a madam. He told me that the work is very easy but the salary is very good. Then my aspiration increased very much and I planned to migrate by any means.*

*The company helped in issuing my passport and paid the money themselves as I had said that it will take some time to arrange money so they had issued it very urgently saying that there is urgent demand from the company for ladies. The company was demanding NRs 100,000 and my family did not have the money so we requested to pay it once I earned money in Kuwait. The manpower agency person agreed and arranged for my visa and travel process.*

*The manpower person took 5–6 of us (all ladies) to Silgadhi, India, and from there he took us to Bombay. We were not informed properly that he was taking us to Kuwait. At that time I didn’t know about the legal/illegal process of migration. Hence, I was just thinking to go to Kuwait and earn money. I was not at all afraid as I had lived and studied in India. The manpower person had consulted with a*

*manpower company in Bombay and from there he sent us to Kuwait. After landing in Kuwait, they took our fingerprints and a company person came at the airport to receive us. He took our passport and took us to his office. While we were sitting there, a man (baba) came and he looked at all of us and chose me. I found later on that, it is like selling girls (keti bechne jastai raichha)—persons who need a housemaid are informed by the company once the ladies/housemaid arrive. They pay the company and take the housemaid/lady they prefer. So in the same manner, the man chose me and paid money to the company saying that he is ready to keep me as housemaid. So in that way the company sold me (malai tyasari bechyol!).*

*As I had been told that I would work as a security person of a madam, I was very afraid and nervous. I was thinking that the man would take me somewhere and kill me. I was more afraid as I didn’t know the language and what they were saying. The man took me to his home. I worked at his home as housemaid for around one year. The work was very hard. They had six members in their family (owner, his wife, and four children). I had to do each and every thing in the house from 4–5 am in the morning to 11–12 at night and sometimes I had to work till 1–2 in the morning. The work involved: mopping the house early in the morning, cooking food, cleaning the entire house, washing clothes, going to the bazar with the owners to carry things back home. The company had said that I would have salary of 550 dinars per month, but they gave very little money. From the first month’s income, I had sent 280 dinars back home. I used to send some money to the family. Altogether, within 1.5 years, I was able to send NRs 100,000 home.*

*The work was tough, i.e., too much workload all the time. They used to eat different kinds of food. The mama (lady owner) taught me to cook food in the beginning. She used to work in a school and the baba (male owner) was a retired policeman. Mama was good, but baba didn’t treat me well. He didn’t look at me in a good way (malai naramro gari herthyol). One day baba tried to physically assault me, and that time I was able to escape from him. So it became too much for me—it was already too much work, and on top of that baba tried to assault me. So I didn’t feel secure there and thought to leave that house. Next day when nobody was home, I phoned the company and explained my troubles. There was*

a Rai didi (Nepali woman) at the company (the company had employed 2–3 persons from different countries to deal with the workers from different countries), and they came to my house and took me out from the house. The company also returned back my passport.

Then, again, another man took me to work in his home. In that house baba never treated me bad. He used to respect my work and used to say that I work fast and good and I am very active. He also used to praise me for treating their three children well. But the mama of the house didn't like me. Baba used to work in an office and mama used to stay at home. She was conservative and since baba had taken me to home from the company, she always used to suspect her husband and didn't like her husband treating me well. Mama used to lock me in a room when male visitors came at home. Mama was very bad. She used to disrespect her husband.

During Ramadan, I had to work/cook food for the entire night. I was not able to sleep well as they used to eat food around 4–5 in the morning, and for that I had to prepare food at night. I had to do all the other household works during the day. So during the month, I had to work both day and night. In that house also, I had too much workload, and I never used to be free from early in the morning till late night.

One day I was not able to bear the workload and mama was pressurizing me to do much more work. So I told her that I am not able to continue work at her home and requested her to send me back to Nepal. But while I was working she went to my room and stole 200 dinars I had saved. When I asked her why she stole my things, she told me that they had spent money for my visa and documents and as I said I am going back home, she had taken the money and my belongings as compensation. She never returned that money to me even when I continued working for her.

After working there in the house for 3–4 months, mama took me to her maternal home in Jordan during her children's vacation in school. I didn't know how she arranged visa for me to Jordan. After going there, her mother didn't have a housemaid so mama forced me to work both for her mother and for her. They used to stay in two different flats and I had to work (cleaning, cooking everything) for both of

the families. So I was very much pressurized by the overload of work. On top of that one day mama ordered me to clean their car. I became very angry and quarrelled with her. I said: "I have too much work, you have employed me to work for one family but you have forced me to work for two. And now how can you order me to wash the car? I cannot clean the car. If you say I have to do it, you just hire a boy to clean the car and if you cannot pay him, I will pay for him!" She felt a bit ashamed and got a boy to do the work—and she didn't ask for money to me for that work. But later on she insisted that I do the car washing work as well—so my workload kept on increasing.

As the school vacation ended, we all returned back to Kuwait. One day she again stole my money (more than 200 dinars that I had not send to my home), some clothes, and my citizenship card. When I asked her why she did that, she blamed me for stealing her money and clothes (which I had not done). She used to tell me that since she had employed me, she could do anything to me. By that time, I had been working in that house for more than six months. So I didn't feel secure working there as she could do anything to me. So when she was not at home, I called the company saying that I don't want to stay in that house anymore and I requested the Rai Auntie to rescue me. She suggested me to quietly leave the house and come to the company. Since I didn't have anything to take with me (as everything was with mama), I quietly left the house and went to the company when nobody was at home.

The company asked my passport and other belongings from the employer, but mama threatened the company saying that I ran away from the house when nobody was at home and I had stolen things, so she would charge me for absconding and robbery and she is putting a stamp on my passport that would ban me from entering or working anymore in Kuwait. So, after hearing this from mama, the company suggested I go to the Nepal embassy and then return back to Nepal as I would suffer more—as police could put me in the jail for absconding. So I went to the embassy and the embassy officials said they would arrange return back to Nepal by issuing a travel document rather than fighting legally against the house owners—as the chances to win the case would be too low as the case of absconding would be strong from the owner's side.



*Then I stayed at the embassy rescue shelter for suffering Nepalis. The embassy officials had told me that I could travel back within a week. But since I was looking for an opportunity to work in another place, I didn't wish to return back instantly. But later on while staying there at the embassy, I met many Nepali girls who were staying there after being abused by their house owners. After listening to so many Nepali sisters, I decided to return back. There were more than 300 girls in the Nepali embassy, and all of them had different stories of suffering—some were seriously ill, some were waiting for their compensation money to be paid by the owners, some were fighting legally against their employers.*

*I also met a Nepali lady who was tortured—the house owners had put boiling oil on her back and she was doing treatment there and recovering very slowly. So after seeing and talking to all those Nepali ladies at the embassy, I became very scared and frustrated and decided to return back Nepal.*

*I estimated that more than 70 percent of the women who worked as housemaids used to get abused. Though I suffered a lot mainly due to the overload of work and taking away my money and belongings, I consider myself as a lucky person. Many of the housemaids didn't get good food or a sleeping place—they had to sleep on a mattress in a corner of kitchen. I had a good room with good furniture and sleeping place, I used to eat the food that I had cooked for rest of the family members.*

*Later on, I found that I had been sent to Kuwait through a fraud manpower company (chori ko company), which worked through an India-based company. The India-based company worked through a Kuwait-based company. I also found that many of the ladies who had gone back to the manpower agency (in India) after being rescued claimed for compensation. But the company had disappeared. So, after returning back, I was unable to track them down.*

*After returning back from Kuwait. I stayed at my home for 2–3 years. As I was not able to earn money during my first visit, I was just thinking to go to Malaysia or Gulf to earn money. My father was not in favor of giving me permission to migrate once again. But my mother and younger sister supported me. They were convinced as I told them that I am going through a legal channel this time and working*

*in a hospital rather than in an individual house. So this time also I applied through a manpower agency in Birtamod, Jhapa from where my cousin had recently gone to Dubai and he had got a good income there. This time, I am confident that I will get good work and good salary—as I am going through a legal channel. But still I am not confident whether I would get the work and salary in accordance with the agreement. Initially the manpower agency was telling me that I would get a helper's job in a hospital. But now the company is not sure—so it may be the helper's job in a hospital or another job.*

*The manpower is asking for 110,000 rupees this time, but we have negotiated the price down to 100,000 rupees. I have done my medical test in Birtamod, but the manpower agency asked me to do it once again in Kathmandu. Apart from the money I have to pay for the manpower agency, I have expenses for orientation class, expenses to come and stay in Kathmandu. The manpower company had told me that my ticket and visa would come anytime in today or tomorrow. Hence, they have asked me to deposit the total money to their office in Birtamod, so my mother is going there to deposit the money. On top of that, the manpower agency have asked to pay 3,000 rupees additional money for paying at the airport.*

*Though manpower agency has not shown me the agreement, they have said that my monthly salary would be 1,200 UAE dirhams. I have told them that if I won't get a good work and salary mentioned in the agreement, I would return back and you have to pay back my money. And they have said me to be confident and that except for the visa fee they would return the ticket and other expenses (around 70,000 rupees) if I return back. So that is why I am confident on this manpower company.*

*Till now I haven't signed any papers. They haven't given me my passport. The orientation class teacher had advised to keep a copy of all the documents. But I haven't got those documents till now and they are saying that I may have to fly tomorrow or the day after. So, I will know all the things only after reaching at the destination. They have fixed the salary (of 1,200). Though I have already migrated to foreign country, I am still new for Dubai. Hence, I cannot tell right now what will happen there.*

*The first time, when I went to Kuwait, I was very*

*much afraid and nervous as I didn't know the language, I didn't know how the place would be and how the people would be. But I learnt the language within three months. During the first few days/months, I had become like dumb. The baba/mama used to tell to do something, but I didn't catch them, and they used to use signs for me. In a way it was very difficult. But in the other hand it was good as well, because as I didn't know the language, I didn't care whatever they tell me—I used to think that they are saying good things to me. But as I learnt the language, I felt very disgusted to hear the bad things they were saying to me and they used to scold me a lot. The owners used to take me as a commodity. They didn't treat me as a human. They always used to think that they had paid money for me so I have to do each and every thing for them.*

*I am going again because, I was not able to fulfill my desire to earn money the first time. I think that I know many things about the Gulf countries now. So, I know what to do and what not. I want to earn money and then start a business in Nepal. As I am not educated, I cannot get good work and earn good money in Nepal. So, if I migrate to the Gulf countries or Malaysia, I can earn much more money than I can ever earn in Nepal. My plan is that if I can earn 500,000 Indian rupees (800,000 Nepali rupees), I will invest the money in some business in Nepal and start my own work.*

As we can see, gender and generational considerations feature prominently in domestic work, whether it is within Nepal or outside. Women domestic migrant workers are dutiful daughters and self-sacrificing mothers or hard-working wives who have embarked on a journey to support their household, but is often tough and painful and at the cost of their family, and children in particular. While women make decisions to migrate to support their family, paradoxically they must be away to do so, which puts emotional strain on them. In their endeavor to maximize their income, the physical displacement may cause emotional upheaval in the lives of the women and their family back home. As these women migrant domestic workers travel to offer comfort to privileged women in the Gulf States and free them from labor related to the care of children, these migrant women's absence in their own households puts significant pressure on the care

of elderly, children, and others left behind.

Migrants, women, and domestic workers all face exclusion, but women domestic migrant workers are particularly vulnerable due to multiple exclusion they face in the destination. They are not only migrants but also women who work in the domestic sphere, and therefore they have access to very low levels of protection and justice, and are susceptible to discrimination, abuse, and exploitation. While their participation in the labor market and life outside of the households does offer them autonomy and challenges social and cultural norms associated with Nepali women's subjugation, it is undermined by the domestic work that reproduces gender hierarchies and poor legal and social protection that puts their dignity and safety at risk. Working conditions in the reproductive or domestic sphere may lead to the intensification, decomposition, and re-composition of gender inequalities. Typical work involves cleaning, washing, and cooking as well as caring for children, the elderly, and the infirm, and is vulnerable to employer abuses. The structural violence and dislocation that women face involve working long hours, withholding of documents and salary, denial of food and sleep, lack of social life and belonging, constant threat of physical and emotional abuse, lack of access to justice and legal remedy, etc. It is the commodification of labor and its institutionalization in the transnational space that strips women migrant domestic workers of their fundamental rights. In some sense, women migrant domestic workers' condition is comparable to "bare life," i.e., a life that has very little value and worth.

Despite the known abuses, the governments of destination countries, the recruitment agencies, and the employers view migrants as merely a workforce to meet labor shortages and generally do not privilege protective measures and gender-sensitive policies. The government of Nepal is also unwilling and/or unable to address the situation, as it profits from the migrants' remittances in hard currency. When profit maximization drives the entire migration process, issues of rights and legal protection of the migrants become secondary. Embarking on a journey to paid employment has certainly offered opportunity for income to

women who otherwise are largely excluded from participation in the labor market. This has certainly challenged the stereotypical representation of Nepali women as unproductive and contributed to financial gains for women. However, it is the nature of domestic work that puts women through humiliation, as the work is not only “unskilled” but also something that they are doing for another family at the cost of not being able to provide care for their own family. Moreover, while women are often praised as sacrificing mothers and dutiful daughters for sending money to support the family back home, they are also susceptible to being seen as “loose women” who have spent time away from their family. Women’s agency, mobility, exposure, and wider experience do contribute to their sense of empowerment, which may challenge existing gender norms. Nevertheless, return and integration of these women is also likely to meet with gender-specific challenges.

### **Construction Workers**

If there is one sector where the demand for labor has been consistently growing, it is the construction sector in Nepal. As the country struggles with modernization, through the construction of houses, schools, roads, irrigation canals, and other physical infrastructure in the cities, towns, and village centers, there has been a growing demand for labor and its mobility. Anyone who has conducted fieldwork in rural or urban Nepal cannot help but witness the construction work that is going on in the country and that is funded by the government, donors, and the private sector, as well as by the people themselves. The trucks full of concrete, iron, cement, and sand, and the number of stone and other quarries with excavators that one witnesses while travelling around Nepal gives the sense of the scale of construction in the country. This process has certainly benefitted the labor population, as demand for workers has increased and so has their pay.

As a part of the research, we conducted fieldwork in a construction site of a major housing complex in Kathmandu and at a road construction site near Kathmandu. Although the construction

sector is diverse and so are the working conditions, we use findings from our fieldwork in these two settings to illustrate the work processes involved and highlight the experiences of workers.

Workers in the construction sector work on a daily-wage basis. The wage of the worker varies according to where and whether the work is arranged via a contractor or on his/her own. Construction workers with no specific skills in Kathmandu earned about NRs 500 per day, whereas the wage was around NRs 200–300 in small towns and villages outside of Kathmandu. However, if the work commitment was longer (or job security was higher) and was arranged via a contractor, the wage might go down to as low as NRs 290 per day, even in Kathmandu. The work often involved moving between work sites and different employers. Due to the increased demand for construction workers in the booming housing sector in Kathmandu, most laborers were found to be working with contractors as a way of securing job continuity. Often middlemen, who get a commission from the employer, are mobilized to recruit construction workers. They supply laborers using their social and work networks and are often employed as low-level supervisors in the construction site itself. Although the system of advance payment does exist in the construction sector, it is not as widespread as in the brick kilns. This gives the laborers more choice/flexibility to move between work sites, and laborers are “freer” than in the brick kilns. Those who work in the construction sector often live at the work site or in rented accommodation together with friends or family. In major construction sites, workers appeared to have been equipped with health and safety concerns visible in terms of the helmet and jackets they were wearing, although most workers either had no shoes or very poor shoes providing little protection. In small-scale construction projects, safety measures were not followed and the work was arranged and managed informally.

In Kathmandu, construction workers gathered in specific sites in the morning, and labor contractors would come and pick them up for work in different parts of the city:





*Migrant workers from Kapilbastu and Banke doing preparatory work for blacktopping the road from Kathmandu to Nuwakot District*

*I went to the western side of Maharajgunj crossing and saw many people gathered there in an open space. Some construction materials such as gravel and sand were piled up where the workers had been gathered. I saw a group of about five women (aged around 35–40) sitting on a gravel pile and talking to each other. Three–four youths were sitting in a group chatting among themselves. They were clearly expecting someone to come and offer them work: as soon I came close, all of these workers' eyes were on me with expectation.*

*Workers would gather here early in the morning from 5 to 11 am from all parts of the valley, especially from surrounding areas, in search of work.*

*Contractors or middlemen also came from different parts of the country to hire them. Many workers had come from different areas of Nepal. (Fieldnotes, Sanjaya, Kathmandu, May 2012)*

Public work, including road construction and construction of government buildings and other infrastructure, is a major source of employment for the laboring population. During our

fieldwork, we were able to observe a number of construction sites in different parts of Nepal. Often referred to as “*jyaladari kaam*” (wage work/labor), these ranged from day work repairing a wall, to maintenance of pavements, to construction of houses and major roads.

In the north of the Kathmandu valley where we carried out fieldwork in a road construction site, workers were divided into different groups according to their place of origin and the nature of their work. Those from Kapilbastu district in the Terai, about 300 kilometers away from the construction site, were in the biggest group with 45 workers from a Tharu background, 15 female and 30 male, between the ages of 14 and 22 with a majority around 17–18 years of age. A local contractor had brought them to the construction site and was also supervising their work. Their work ranged from laying gravel to making the base to blacktop the road: laying gravel, cleaning the road surface (brushing and sweeping), blacktopping (spraying the tar), and topping it with gravel chips. Both male and female did

similar work. For example: 2–3 boys and 2–3 girls were brushing the road surface (before blacktopping), and the same number of boys and girls were sweeping it to clear the dust particles that came out of the brushing. While blacktopping, 2–3 boys were spraying the tar and 7–8 girls were putting the chips where the chips-topping truck had left gaps. Hence, basically, the laborers' work was to backstop the main blacktopping work done through the machine. The Tharu workers' supervisor was wearing a t-shirt, shorts, cap, and sport shoes, and his clothes and shoes were distinct from those of the other workers. The workers had slippers and trousers and a few had a cap and other had covered their heads with a handkerchief/scarf. The ladies were wearing kurta-salwar and flip-flops, a shawl or shirt to cover their upper body (extra cover on top of their kurta), a mask, and their heads were covered by a shawl. The truck drivers and laborers on the trucks were observed to be teasing/sexually harassing the girls both by saying things and trying to hit or touch them with the truck while they were working. However, the boys from the same group, i.e., Tharu boys were not harassing the girls (maybe because they were from the same village). The boys working with the tar were wearing canvas shoes (provided by the company), gloves, and black pieces of cloth to cover their head and face. The boys and girls who were doing the brushing and sweeping work were provided with masks.

The male laborers slept in a big tent near the road, which accommodated about 30 workers, whereas the females had rented rooms on the ground floor of a house where the contractors and site manager were living on the first floor. They had a common mess to eat food. Three Tharu women (around the ages of 35–40) were there to run the mess. Their mess was outside the house where the female workers and contractors were staying. It had a kitchen under an open hut and did not have a particular place for eating food. Hence, the workers used to collect their food plates from the kitchen place and go to their sleeping place to eat the food. They had meals three times a day: light breakfast early in the morning, lunch around 11 am and dinner around 7 in the evening. They were having regular Nepali meal (*daal/bhat* and *tarkari*)

for lunch and dinner. The Tharu group was living as a family; they were from the same village and mostly related to each other.

There was also a small group of male laborers from Salyan, with ages ranging from 16 to 35. They were working on the side drainage of the road—both working as masons and laborers. Their accommodation was next to Tharu boys' hut. They had one open hut as a kitchen and another as their sleeping place. The Salyan group did not have separate/extra people to run their mess and they were cooking their food themselves—they used to cook the food once for the entire day (for two meals)—around 11 in the morning and 7 in the evening. They ate *daal bhat* with very few vegetables.

During our fieldwork, we met a young man, aged 17, from Salayan, who was working on the road's drainage. This was the first time he had left his village for work. He came to work in road construction after taking the school leaving certificate exam along with two other boys. He knew about the work and the place from his father who used to work there as a mason and contractor. His father went back home to manage his land and sent him to work there so that he could study further. For him, the major reason for coming to work was the excitement of being close to Kathmandu. The contractor had told him that the work was in Kathmandu and that he would have daily wage of NRs 350 rupees per day. However, now he thinks that the contractor had betrayed him, as the work is not in Kathmandu, and he has not seen the city yet. He was brought directly to the construction site via the Kathmandu Bus Park without spending any time in Kathmandu.

He did not seem very happy. He found that the work was heavy for him. He worked for 12 hours from 6am to 6pm on a daily basis. Although he was promised NRs 350 per day, he was paid only NRs 300 per day. He was planning to go home after the monsoon when he would have saved NRs 10,000 to 12,000 for 2.5 months of work. He had plans to go to Kathmandu and buy clothes and shoes for his family and then take the cash to use it for household expenses and for his education—to buy books. Although he was interested in



continuing his studies, he was not sure whether that would be possible, as his father wanted him to start working and earning some money.

Earlier, his father used to go to work as a construction worker in Himanchal in India. His father preferred to work in Nepal, as India was far away and there was always a kind of fear while travelling back from the work place—looting, maltreatment at the border, and high expense of travel. Many people (mainly boys) from his village continued to go to work in Himanchal. Based on his father's experience, he said that people got timely payment in India, but he is not sure whether he will get the amount on time in his current job.

He wanted to study and later on open a shop (grocery store) in the town of Dang. He did not like the idea of migrating to India and other countries (*bidesh*) for work. He said that in recent years, the trend of people (16 to 40 years of age) going to *bidesh* from his village had increased a lot. Many boys from his village have gone to Malaysia and a few to Dubai. They had to invest more than NRs 150,000 rupees. For him, going to *bidesh* by taking out a loan was not a good idea, and since he has no money, he has never thought about it.

His monthly expenses at the construction site come around NRs 3,000 to NRs 4,000; that includes the cost of his mobile phone and meals. He does not get paid for overtime work. If there is no work because of “*bandh*” (shut-down) or due to rain, he does not get money for the day. He says that contractors lure the villagers by “showing a good dream” but when they reach the destination, they find a completely different picture. He does not like to work in the construction sector any more. But, he is not sure whether he can discontinue the work in future.

He was wearing second-hand clothes (re-stitched t-shirt and trouser), cap, and slippers. He would wash his clothes during his free time, and the washed clothes were hung on a rope near the tent. His work during the day was mixing cement, carrying stones, and helping the masons. In the evening, he along with other workers unloaded cement bags from the trucks and stored them in a house.

The construction site had several female laborers, some of whom were young. One of the girls said that she followed the footsteps of her sister who came to work on the road construction project. Now her sister is already married, and she is staying with her husband in Delhi who is working as a carpenter (*kath mistri*). The girl has studied up to class two. Previously, she worked as domestic help in different places. She had stayed at a house in Kathmandu for 7–8 months. Since the house owners did not treat her well and scolded her, she did not return to work after she came home to visit her family. Later, she went to Delhi to work as a domestic helper for another family from her village. The owners were very good, and she was well treated there. She had to clean the house, cook food, and clean utensils. After staying there for 2–3 years, she returned to her village. Then again she worked as housemaid with a family residing in the town of Butwal in Nepal. And while visiting her home, the supervisor of the road construction company was there in the village collecting (*jamma garne*) laborers. Hence, her father sent her to work on this construction site. Since she is there with her female cousins she is happy to work and did not think it was heavy or laborious work for her. She said that she would continue to work in construction. She gets some money from the supervisor for petty expenses, such as for her mobile phone or extra food at the site, but the bulk of her earnings go to her father back home.

Although the construction sector workers worked for long hours, often in very poor working conditions, which often involved dust and mud, the work was not attached and many workers often left the work and went home or to other construction sites. The system of advance payment was limited, and they were paid regularly or if they wished at the end of the work. The recruitment was through the labor contractor using social networks, and laborers often went in groups from the same village, maintaining a social support network in their time away from the village. Often the laborers were collected (*jamma garne*) and taken in trucks and tractors to the work sites, for which they did not have to pay, although that could be very far from their village where they would spend months before coming home or moving to another construction site. Construction work,

except for the specialized workforce, did not require specific skills. The manual work involved mixing and carrying, and people learned their work quickly. The payment was based on a daily wage and the work was often called “*jyaladari kaam*” (wage work). Accommodation was often poor, made up of plastic sheets and had very little protection from heat, rain, or cold. The workers did not have access to health care and would spend their own earnings on health care when they fell ill. If they were ill and unable to work, there would be no pay. Because of the hard work for long hours in a dusty environment, illness was a major challenge for construction workers.

### Nepali Migrant Workers in India

While estimates vary, as many as two million Nepali migrants are believed to be working in India. Although the proportion of Nepali workers in India has decreased from 80 percent of total external migrants in 2001 to 41 percent in 2009,<sup>9</sup> mainly due to the emergence of other migration destinations following the second wave of work migration from Nepal to various global destinations such as the Gulf States and East Asia, migration to India continues to remain an important destination for poorer households in the middle hills.

Migration to India in search of work is not a new phenomenon. The first wave of migration began in 18th and 19th centuries when state policies and agrarian changes forced peasants in the hills to move out of their land and seek their livelihoods elsewhere, both within Nepal and across the border into India. Labor migration of young men started with the recruitment to serve in the army of the Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh and then into the British Army in India. The unique open border between the two countries, formalized by the Nepal-India Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950, allows the citizens of both countries to cross the border without having to produce official documents and offers equal treatment of both citizens. The 1950 Treaty and the letters of exchange that followed the Treaty state that neither country may unilaterally introduce travel provisions that

might restrict free movement of people across the border.

Despite such provisions, the open border is not quite open when seen from the perspective of labor migrants who cross into India. Not only do the migrants have to navigate the border police who often maltreat them, they also face threats from transporters and traders who often physically force them to travel in specific transport and cheat them on the prices. Migrants who cross the border, although initially excited, are disciplined and humiliated by both formal and informal gatekeepers as a way of producing low-wage earners in India. Border crossing featured prominently in the narratives of migrants we spoke to, who were often humiliated, cheated, and looted while crossing. Although the unique arrangement between Nepal and India allows Nepali migrants to travel across the border into India (and vice versa) and earn their livelihoods without having to produce any documentary evidence, it also means that a Nepali migrant in India is in an ambiguous category, neither native nor an alien.

### Recruitment

Local labor contractors actively recruit seasonal laborers to work in road and house construction in Uttarakhand and Himanchal; all the other forms of migration to India are organized and supported by kinship networks. Over the years, social networks and inheritance have played a crucial role in sustaining the migration cycle between the villages of origin in the western hills and specific destinations in India. Social networks remain important not only in organizing migration but also in finding work and living together in India. Migrants from particular places and kinship networks often live together, and their interaction is mainly limited to the kinship group. The employers or “owners” in India often put requests to employed migrants to arrange for a domestic worker or a *chowkidar* or a hotel worker for them in India, and migrants, when they come to visit their family in Nepal or during festivals, take one or more of their relatives or neighbors when they return back to India. Often the returnee migrant

<sup>9</sup> WB, 2011, “Large-scale Migration and Remittances in Nepal: Issues, Challenges and Opportunities,” Kathmandu, Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Sector Unit, South Asia Region, World Bank, p. 130.



*Left: Two migrant boys from Kalikot (Nepal) working as porters and pilgrim carriers at Badrinath, Uttarakhand, India Right: Migrant from Kalikot carrying a pilgrim at Badrinath, Uttarakhand, India*

may pay for the new migrant or may loan the travel fare to be paid once the new migrant starts earning money. In several of the work settings such as domestic work or security guard or hotel worker in India, migrant workers are expected to find a “reliable” replacement if they are to go on leave to Nepal. While some migrants may sell the job to other new migrants, others bring their close relatives as a replacement.

In a restaurant in Delhi, we found that all the workers were brought by the cook from his village. The workers were either his neighbors or distant relatives. Whenever there was a shortage of workers, the “owner” would talk to his workers to try and attract new migrants to come and work in Delhi. With limited payment and difficult work conditions, the employers of Nepali migrants were finding it difficult to attract Nepali migrants to come and work for them. Due to the labor shortage, in several work settings, a few workers were found to be working for long hours.

Labor contractors are active in the far-western and mid-western hills and take with them groups of 20–40 workers to Himanchal or Uttarakhand

to work in the construction sector or in apple orchards. This type of recruitment is seasonal and done by an experienced migrant himself, who makes a small profit by arranging workers who are fit to work in high altitude sites on the other side of the border.

### ***Working and Living Conditions in India***

Not all Nepali migrants in India are poor or marginal, but most work in difficult and exploitative conditions. Except for some who work in government, police, army, or office work in the private sector and a few others who run enterprises, most Nepali migrants work in menial and low-paid jobs in the informal service sectors, domestic work, and in the manufacturing, construction, and agricultural sectors. We conducted fieldwork among those who work in menial and low-paid jobs in the informal service sector such as porters, construction workers, security guards, hotel and restaurant workers, domestic workers, and factory workers in Delhi and Uttarakhand. Except for a few family units who make *momos* (dumplings) and/or are involved in running food stalls selling “*momo*” and “Chinese food” in New Delhi, there is no practice of engagement in



enterprise among Nepali migrants in India.

Although the demand for Nepalis working as *chowkidars* (guard/watchman) and factory workers, which were two very popular sources of employment in Indian cities along with agriculture in rural areas, is generally declining, there is a steady demand for Nepali workers to work as hotel/restaurants workers, domestic workers, and manual laborers in road construction and as porters in different parts of India. Seasonal work is common in road construction and portering in Uttarakhand and Himanchal. Most migration to other parts of India is temporary and circular (*aune-jane*). Although a very small number of migrants take their families with them, most migration is individual in nature, leaving the family members back in the village to be supported by remittances sent from India. Except for medical treatment, most migrants do not take their family members or wives with them, not only because the families left behind have the responsibility to look after the land the care for the children/elderly, but also because of lack of accommodation and physical security in the destination. The practice of migration to work in India starts often at a young age, and many continue to travel back and forth until they are old. Once unable to work in India, old men retire back in their in their villages to be cared by their families and children.

With no wife or children accompanying them as well as an aspiration to “save there and eat here,”<sup>10</sup> migrants often end up working for long hours. As regular income is low to cover the living and travel costs at the destination, most must work overtime in order to make some savings.

Commonly known as *chowkidār*, *gorkhā*, or *bahādur*, those who work as watchmen are employed in private bungalows, housing colonies, government offices, factories, hospitals, or businesses. Commercialization of the security business under multinational security companies, such as Group Four, means that the social networks that long formed the basis of a

continuous supply of Nepali men to work as watchmen are slowly being replaced by formal procedures of recruitment.

The working hours of watchmen are not fixed, and it is usual to see these men working overtime in set shifts, often up to 15–17 hours a day to earn more money to enable them to save and send money back to their family in Nepal. The monthly salary of watchmen ranges from anywhere between IRs 2,500 and 8,000, but they are able to earn more money by working overtime and doing other work (such as taking children to school, cleaning cars, shopping, and so on) for the residents, as well as getting occasional tips from the residents. During our fieldwork in Delhi, especially in the morning hours, the watchmen would be busy cleaning cars with a bucket of water and a wet cloth. Although most watchmen work long hours, it is not always possible for them to dramatically change their living conditions. A few initially felt that the job was difficult and boring but have found it easier as they got used to it. Despite the long working hours, the job as watchman is particularly important for the flexibility it provides to work overtime and earn more money. It also offers the security of shelter and recognition as a capable and trustworthy person.

Watchmen are usually given a uniform and a long stick and a whistle, but this is not always the case. Dressed in a uniform, holding long sticks and traditionnally with a moustache, the watchmen move around their building, check cars and people entering the building, and demonstrate their employer's confidence in them. As the owner of the building passes through the gate, they often display their obedience and discipline with a salute. The job is considered easier when compared to work in restaurants and domestic work, which require long hours of work, often under constant surveillance of employers/owners. The job also involves loneliness, as they spend most of their time standing at the gate with hardly anyone with whom they could talk, except the domestic workers staying in or visiting the building, or watchmen from the neighboring buildings. It is

<sup>10</sup> F. Watkins, 2004, “‘Save There, Eat Here’: Migrants, Households and Community Identity among Pakhtuns in Northern Pakistan,” *Migration, Modernity and Social Transformation in South Asia*, F. Osella and K. Gardner, Delhi: Sage.

almost impossible for them to get involved intimately with others. Working as watchmen is difficult when they are attacked by thieves or unable to catch the thieves, which results instantly in the loss of the job or deductions from their salary for a few months. Watchmen are also the first suspects if a flat/house is broken into in the colony.

A growing but invisible workplace for the increasing number of young Nepali men is to work as helpers or domestic workers in middle-class houses in cities like Delhi and other small towns in India. A small number of women also work as domestic workers. The work involves long hours, although their monthly income ranges from anywhere between IRs 1,500 and IRs 3,000. Workers are provided with meals and accommodation. Often invisible, except when they leave the home for 1–3 hours per day, those who work as domestic workers spend most of their time inside the apartment of their middle-class employers. The job involves loneliness, as they spend most of their time working on their own, except when they get instructions from their employer. The owners put restrictions on workers spending much time outside the house. Domestic workers spend most of their time preparing and cooking food, cleaning dishes, cleaning the house, and washing clothes. The men we spoke to did not complain about their work, although they did not see domestic help or working as helpers in hotels or restaurants as a long-term job, and they hoped to find “better work” (*rāmro kām*) in an “office” later.

Just like domestic work, working in hotels and restaurants can be very difficult if not daunting and is often the first resort for young men who end up in cities like Delhi. Hotel work involves long hours on a fixed salary, with a starting salary as low as IRs 2,500 and overtime as much as IRs 6,000. Work involves cleaning, chopping, cooking, and shopping for goods. Just like domestic workers, the workers in restaurants are provided with accommodation in the same place where they work. There is no concept of a day off for those who work as domestic workers and for those who work in hotels/restaurants.

In Uttarakhand and Himanchal, Nepali migrants worked as porters, while a few worked as daily-

wage laborers in construction sites. In hill stations such as Nainital, Simla, and other towns, it is possible to see several men carrying “ropes” and wearing Nepali caps, waiting to be called by tourists to carry their luggage. Nepali migrants, locally called *Dotyals* (literally means those from Doti district in Nepal but referring to Nepali migrants who come to Nainital from the mid-western and far-western hills of Nepal), were easily identifiable by the ropes they held in their hand and the torn/dirty clothes they wore. The porters were self-employed, which gave the migrants flexibility in terms of working hours but also put them at risk if they could not find work for some reason (e.g., bad weather). All the young men we met looked very weak, fatigued, and overworked.

The routine was regular for these men. Most of them shared a room and lived with other migrants from the same village. They cooked and ate together in their little shack. They worked for the whole day in the market, waiting for someone to call them for work. After 5 or 6 pm in the evening, they went back to their little room, cooked food, ate, and slept.

They earned anywhere between IRs 100–400 per day, with an average of IRs 150–200 per day. Most migrants were conscientious about saving, although a few ended up spending hard-earned money on alcohol in the evening. They did not have bank accounts or a safe place in their room to keep their savings; they kept their savings with a few “trusted” shopkeepers for safety. The shopkeepers were very honest, and they got their money whenever they wanted, sometimes with some interest. On average, a migrant saved about IRs 20,000 in a year.

A particular aspect of migrants’ life on days off in Delhi was to go sightseeing to different parts of the city where there were administrative buildings, places of tourist attractions like the India Gate, the President’s House, and occasionally to the movies. Commonly known as *ghumna jāne* (to wander around), this involved exploring new places for entertainment in shopping malls, market areas, or in movie theaters.

Although they didn’t always have access,



television and the movies were popular forms of entertainment among the migrant men in Delhi. Whenever there were opportunities, young men often watched movies, serials, news, or cricket matches on television. Except for domestic workers, other young migrants went to see a movie whenever they were free. A couple of young men said that they never missed a newly released movie, and spent much of their earnings on movies. They had up-to-date knowledge about the movies, movie stars, television serials, and gossip.

Although the experience of Nepali migrants in India is very diverse, most work in the informal sector. This involves long working hours under difficult working conditions. Often, migrants address their employer as “owner” (*malik*, or *sahu*), which signifies the nature of a relationship that contains feudal elements. The salary or income is not very high in India, and they end up spending quite a lot of money on travel. However, the work is readily available and they “get paid on time,” which was a major concern for many if they were working in Nepal, where payment was not prompt after completing the work. Nepali migrants often lived closely with others from Nepal, and this social network was important for them while working in a distant land. When they found it difficult to continue working, migrants often left work without waiting for any payment. Initially payment was always very low, and the rise in their salary was dependent on demonstrating their ability to work. Migrants often did not have to pay for accommodation; if not they lived together in a group of 4–6 and contributed about INRs 200–400 per person per month for a room in a *juggi* (slum).

### **Nepali Workers in the “Brave New World” of Qatar**

Qatar has a population of about 1.8 million of which 94 percent are migrants. Nepali migrants total about 400,000 and constitute the largest single contingent of foreign workers. The majority of migrants work in construction: hundreds of thousands of workers are needed to fulfill Qatar’s ambitious objectives, both economic and linked to the projection of its visibility and power. These two objectives come

together in the enormous construction projects that are remodeling the city of Doha in view of the 2022 football World Cup.

Qatar has created a kind of genetically engineered society in which migrants constitute the expendable labor force that is functional to the production of the wealth and power of those—the small minority of Qatari families and the small elite of foreign managers—who rule from the top of the pyramid. As in Huxley’s dystopia, the pyramid is stratified, and because the various layers have different interests, there is little opportunity for solidarity or the expression of grievances *across* layers. Moreover, because all migration is temporary—a maximum of 2–3 years, after which a 2-year break is mandatory, except for a small caste of managers (south Indians, Palestinians, nationals of other Gulf countries) who are allowed to stay longer—the Qatari state has little concern for the long-term stability of the pyramid. Unnecessary layers or groups can be easily phased out as required and with minimal risk to stability. Nepalis constitute the bottom layer: the most disadvantaged, exploited, and discriminated against.

### **Complexity of Labor Arrangements**

Migration to Qatar is based on the *Kafala* (sponsorship) system, which reflects the practices of control and exclusion of migrants. There are two types of sponsorship arrangements:

- (a) The regulated system based on an agreement between the governments of Qatar and Nepal allows for a certain quota of Nepalis to migrate to Qatar each year. This involves a system of agents who identify potential migrants at the village level and manpower agencies in Nepal that provide a number of services: basic induction, health check, required paperwork, identification of a *Kapil* (sponsor, a Qatari national) and a *Mudir* (manager) in Qatar, a contract specifying work conditions and salary, provision of passport and ticket as well as exit permit from Nepal, and visa for Qatar. Typically, aspiring migrants are required to pay approximately NRs 150,000 for these services and spend a variable amount of time—from a few days to several weeks—in guesthouses or small hotels in Kathmandu before receiving their



*Left: Two Nepali restaurant workers, Doha, Qatar. Right: Migrant workers waiting for their exit permit are staying in a labor camp outside Doha. When workers leave their job because they find work or accommodation conditions unacceptable they often have to wait for months for their passport to be returned and for their exit permit.*

marching orders. Repeated visits to Kathmandu may be required before the documents are finalized. In some cases, the process is aborted by the manpower agency or the sponsor. In theory, manpower agencies are obliged to protect the migrant from excessive costs and, if contractual arrangements are not respected or overly exploitative, arrange for the return of the migrant, at their cost, to his/her village. In practice, the manpower agency is reluctant to do so or does so only as a last resort. Most migrants need to take out loans to cover the manpower agency fees and other expenses. Loan rates are usually around 36 percent/year, sometimes up to 50 percent/year, and can quickly become an unsustainable burden, especially if things do not go as planned when the migrant reaches Qatar.

- (b) The so-called “free visa” system whereby a migrant already working in Qatar identifies a potential *mudir* and a work opportunity and contacts an interested potential migrant—usually a family member or someone from the same village. This bypasses the manpower agency and is therefore much

cheaper for the sponsor. Moreover, the aspiring migrants often have to pay for their own ticket. If the migrant leaves via India, the process also bypasses the quota system and can be faster. However, the risks for the migrant are greater, as the agreement is not recorded, and even the minimal protection afforded by the manpower agency is absent. There are many instances of migrants who are “invited” by a family member or friend, only to find that they have been tricked into a predicament that has no relation to the conditions that were promised. Because the *mudir* typically pays a fee to the migrant who “invites” a family member, there is an in-built incentive to trick the newcomer into coming, with ensuing painful family or community rifts back home.

- (c) There is also a third way: illegal entry into Qatar with a tourist visa. This is sometimes the route chosen by female migrants who come to work as maids and carers (Nepal no longer allows female migrants under 30 years of age to go legally to Qatar) and by young men who come on the odd chance that they will be allowed entry. The risks are high

because entering on a tourist visa requires evidence of a return ticket and sufficient cash as well as a contact address in Qatar. Those who enter illegally tend to have a precarious existence, can be subjected to physical violence by their employers, and face immediate deportation if caught by the police.

Few Nepali skilled laborers make it to Qatar; the vast majority are unskilled and work in construction and agriculture. The few semi-skilled laborers work as taxi drivers or hotel workers. Ninety percent of Nepali migrants are male; a few women work as carers or domestic servants. Because of the costs involved for travel, fees to the manpower agencies, passport issuance, buying a suitcase, clothes, and other items before departure, most Nepalis have to take out loans from village moneylenders (at rates of 3 percent interest/month or even more) or from their family. Recruitment is through a network of Nepali brokers and Qatar-based sponsors. Unlike migration to India, kinship and social networks play a minimal role: recruitment is for individuals or small groups who are rarely from the same area or village (the exception is when migrants are “called” via the “free visa” scheme where kinship networks are the main vehicle).

### **Exploitation**

Push and pull factors combine in the decision to migrate: poverty, the structural violence of the caste system and semi-feudal labor arrangements in the agricultural sector, family pressure (real or presumed), the aspiration for change and a better life, on one side, and the role of agents who scour the countryside looking for potential migrants, on the other. Many aspiring migrants have heard both positive and negative stories of “what happens.” A few, particularly the semi-literate youths from remote areas, are—or seem to be—genuinely ignorant of the exploitative conditions they are likely to find. Overall, the lure is very strong, and aspiring migrants tend to brush aside the risks or block them from their minds and hope for the best.

Whether the overall experience is a positive one or not, there is a widespread sense among migrants of “being owned.” Once they step out of the Doha International Airport, migrants

become totally dependent on their employer for their survival and well-being. Their interface is the *mudir*, usually a migrant himself, who manages the laborers on behalf of the employer (usually a Qatari national). Migrants are dependent on their *mudir* for everything: working and living conditions, payment of salary, ensuring their legal status (proper ID and visa), access to health care, as well as permission to change job and financing of their return ticket home. This set-up creates the basis for exploitation, which starts with the confiscation of the migrant’s passport upon arrival. Though illegal as per Qatari law, this is the norm for unskilled and semi-skilled workers—i.e., the vast majority of Nepali migrants. As one migrant put it, *“The first thing that happens is that your identity is taken away from you.”* The sense of bondage becomes apparent when, in many cases, migrants realize that their working conditions and salary are much inferior to what they were promised (and their contract says), that they cannot change their employer or their job unless the employer agrees to sign a release waiver, and that they cannot leave the country without an exit permit, the denial of which is used to pressure migrants to accept under-par conditions, etc.

Effectively, many migrants become caught in a vise: they are forced to accept because challenging the system is difficult, costly, time-consuming, and of uncertain outcome. Debt entrapment, family pressure, and the potential loss of face of being considered “*faltu*” (useless) upon return to the village conspire to force migrants to comply. When conditions become abusive or unbearable, the only available option is to run away (which is illegal) and seek employment directly with another *mudir* (which is doubly illegal). The boundaries between illegal and licit fluctuate: for the *mudir* the advantage of recruiting a runaway is that he does not need to pay for health care, the renewal of the visa, and the cost of the return ticket if the migrant is caught by the police. Moreover, the risks incurred by the *mudir* are minimal, as labor laws protect the employers and are seldom enforced in favor of migrants. Such illegal arrangements are sought after by employers in need of greater numbers of workers than the “official” system can provide. Sometimes, despite the obvious risks of deportation and lack of access to services,

such arrangements can work to the advantage of the migrant, as the relationship is more freely entered into than the sponsorship system and pay can be moderately higher. Less bondage, but more insecurity.

Generally speaking, larger employers—and especially the huge construction companies that are part-owned by reputable international companies—provide more predictable and decent working and living conditions than the small employers. Some of the worst forms of exploitation occur for migrants who are recruited by service companies (i.e., companies that provide unskilled labor to larger companies), as the demand for workers fluctuates and the service company is often unwilling or unable to pay salary on time or invest in proper living quarters for its workers.

### **Grievances**

Because of the weakness of the Nepali state's negotiating position, compared to other more "organized" states such as India or the Philippines, the Nepal-Qatar migration framework agreement results in low protection and high exploitation of Nepali migrants. As mentioned, sponsorship agreements are often arbitrary and constitute a modern version of bonded labor, if not slavery. In our interviews we were confronted with a catalogue of grievances and only very few instances of relatively acceptable conditions. The most common issues mentioned were:

- Working conditions and salary do not correspond to the written contract and late payment of salary (sometimes months in arrears). Just one example: a security guard who was promised 1,200 riyal/month + food allowance for 8 hours work/day but received only 1,000 riyal, no food, and was forced to work 12 hours/day.<sup>11</sup>
- Withholding of the exit permit by the *mudir* as a way of pressuring the migrant to stay.
- Refusal by the *mudir* to process the annual

visa extension (which by law is the responsibility of the employer). Employers find this costly (1,200 riyal per worker/year), but without a valid visa migrants cannot obtain an ID card, access to health care, and exit permit.

- Lack of dignity and respect in the workplace but also vis-à-vis Qatari authorities (and the Nepali embassy).
- Impossibility to change employer without the *mudir's* agreement.
- Accommodation provided by the sponsor is very often sub-par, overcrowded (up to 10–14 migrants in one room), or unhygienic.

The sponsor is the key vehicle for obtaining legal ID and health care cards, which can be withheld in order to force the migrant to comply. The expression of grievances is met with threats to withdraw the ID cards or even the sponsorship (without the agreement of the sponsor, and the identification of a new one, it is not possible to change jobs). In theory, workers who are dissatisfied with their jobs have the option of asking the Nepali manpower agency to be repatriated within three months of their arrival (at the manpower agency's expense), but this is difficult for a number of reasons: reluctance of the manpower agency to cover the costs, withholding by the sponsor of papers necessary for obtaining an exit permit, and reluctance of individual migrants to return home and face the loss of face and the onerous debt repayment, etc. As a result, many migrants run away. According to one source, there may be up to 20,000 to 30,000 Nepali "escapees" who lack legal documents and have either found alternative employment illegally or are living under the radar with meager support from former coworkers or Nepali charity associations.

In our fieldwork we collected several life stories of migrants that illustrate the patterns of exploitation and, paradoxically, the continuing allure and prestige associated with migration to Qatar.

<sup>11</sup> This gentleman was particularly vocal in his animosity for the manpower agency in Kathmandu that had recruited him: "I am a former army person. I have fought the insurgency and killed people. When I go back I will kill three more: the lady at the manpower agency and her two bosses." He had taken out a Rs 60,000 loan that he was unable to pay back in full. The interest was 36 percent per year. "It would have been better for me to stay home and raise buffaloes."



### **Recourse/Redress**

When migrants seek redress for exploitative conditions, the odds are stacked against them. The expression of grievances or complaints is ignored or met with hostility. Instances of workers simply being kicked out by their employer for protesting against working or living conditions abound. We met several workers who were in such limbo—no job, no money, no exit permit. A typical case: we met three twenty-year-olds from Langtang, recently arrived, who had complained about their salary and accommodation conditions and who had been thrown out by their *mudir*. They were camping on the roof of a derelict, overcrowded hostel, sleeping among refuse and surviving on the charity of some of the hostel residents and some canned food and supplies provided by a Nepali informal support group. Their only hope was the intervention of the Nepali embassy, which is poorly equipped for the task and in poor standing vis-à-vis the Qatari authorities.

In theory, complaints can be addressed by migrants to the Qatar labor department, but the decisions of the department are often ignored by the *mudirs*, who often do not bother to show up when summoned. Complainants can also go to the courts, but this is expensive, can take months, and is of uncertain outcome. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the *mudir* will comply with the decisions of the court.

The only other avenue of redress is via the Nepali embassy, but it is understaffed if not under-committed, and its leverage with the authorities is minimal. Practically, the labor attaché can call the *mudir* and plead for the problem—usually salary payment or exit permit issues—to be resolved or invite the *mudir* to come to the embassy for a meeting. As he is under no obligation to comply, this often fails. In more serious cases, the embassy writes to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as by law it cannot contact the labor department directly, to request an interview with the department. This can take months to arrange, and the outcome is by no means certain. Eventually, problems get solved when the department releases an exit permit—or when a migrant without proper papers is caught by the police and deported.

Every day, dozens of migrants show up at the embassy (which is located very far from the center of Doha in an area with no public transport) to bring their complaints to the overworked staff. Up to 20–30 migrants with nowhere else to go camp out at the embassy at night. As there is no other space, they roll out some bedding in the offices when the staff have left. Unlike other embassies, Nepal has no hostel facilities. For example, the Philippines embassy has a large hostel for women migrants.

### **Resistance**

In our findings, Nepali migrants in Qatar are neither passive victims regularly facing abuse and exploitation nor successful migrants who have been able to take control of their lives. Experiences run the range from the relatively successful to the abominable. Not all *mudirs* are abusive or insensitive to the human condition of migrants. However, the collective identity of Nepalis in Qatar is one of exploitation, discrimination, and loss of dignity. How do migrants cope with this situation? Membership in trade unions is not possible for migrants (though Qatari trade unions exist and participate in the ILO tripartite structures), but a variety of small self-help groups set up by migrants themselves or by the Non-resident Nepali Association (NRNA) provide some services, including cash subsidies in extreme cases and assistance in repatriation etc. We have nevertheless been able to document some of the everyday forms of resistance. Just as the forms of structural violence these migrants face are subtle although powerful, resistance occurs in the same discreet pattern on an everyday basis (for example: “work to rule” or deliberate slow-down, absenteeism, unofficial work stoppages, etc.).

Strikes are illegal in Qatar, but this does not mean that they don’t happen. A major multinational construction company was obliged to address worker grievances after a series of unofficial strikes in 2006. Similarly, the main taxi company in Qatar, in which many Nepalis work, had to substantially improve salary and working conditions after a strike in 2011. Qatar needs the foreign labor and is mindful of its image: strikes and the visible expulsion of workers do not play well with this image. The



fact remains, however, that the protection afforded by worker organizations is minimal. Actions to confront the system are risky, and, because of the layered structure of the migrants' pyramid, the disparate concerns and grievances of the various layers often do not add up. It is easy for employers to "play" one group or nationality against another, and Nepalis are considered by the employers, and by their co-workers of a different nationality, as the bottom rung of the pyramid. This also explains why Nepalis are a sought-after nationality: they are paid less, complain less, and are seen as hard-working and compliant.

### ***Masculinity***

Ninety percent of Nepali migrants in Qatar are male. They are also relatively young, in their twenties, especially the new arrivals who are more subject to exploitation. Older migrants are usually returnee migrants who have achieved improved conditions and some respectability. Some especially successful migrants, earning good money, and who have become *mudirs* have been allowed to bring their families and have long-term visas. But by and large, migration to Qatar for Nepalis is a young and male affair, which entails considerable emotional suffering (and, presumably, repressed sexuality). Many have left young wives and kids back in their village; others are facing debt entrapment, which precludes them from getting married.

Avenues for socializing among the sexes are extraordinarily limited. Nepali female migrants are either working as maids or as carers, and some are salespersons. Usually their mobility is constrained by tight controls from employers. Male migrants are slightly more free to move around town and tend to congregate on Fridays in a couple of squares or in Nepali restaurants. Moreover, on Fridays access to parks and beaches is reserved for families and women. Men without accompanying spouse or children/family members are chased away (as the authors of this report can attest). This further complicates potential interactions between the sexes.

Language and perceived discrimination preclude contact with female migrants of other nationalities (the Filipino female contingent is quite considerable) and of course with Qatari women.<sup>12</sup> We did not look into how these frustrations are managed, but we did hear several references to substance abuse: as liquor is not available publicly, some migrants consume pesticides or low-quality black market liquor, and many take it regularly.

<sup>12</sup> Although we did hear of one case of the daughter of an employer falling in love with a Nepali worker. The *mudir* tried to get the worker expelled, but this was resisted by the young woman and her father. In the end, the relationship soured because the young woman wanted her future husband to convert to Islam.

### III. KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

While there are significant differences in the experiences of individual migrants who end up in different destinations and work settings, we can come up with a few broad themes.

#### ***Class and Gender***

One of the key features of the identity of migrants is their marginality as members of low or background communities who belong to the poorer sections of rural society. Their decisions to move out of their villages in search of livelihoods is not only due to lack of physical and material capital but also to lack of social and cultural capital. In the absence of social, cultural, economic, and political capital, they are located at the bottom of the social hierarchy not only in their place of origin but also in the destination. Their mobility highlights an apparent contradiction and their liminal position: they leave the villages because of their redundancy in the rural-agrarian labor processes as well as because of the attraction that modernity has to offer in the cities and towns, but they are constantly driven back to their village because of the transient and time-bound nature of their mobility. While there is demand for labor in their villages and in the cities and towns, it is temporary, and they are hired only for short periods of time when there is a peak demand or until they are unable to continue to work for family, health, or other reasons. Their mobility is work related, and depending on the work available, they may bring their family (e.g., in the brick kilns) or may leave their family behind (e.g., in India, or in the Gulf, or in other sectors of work within Nepal).

Labor migration from rural Nepal is both *classed* and *gendered*. Not only do class positions and gender ideas shape migration patterns and work experiences, they also contribute to reproduce gendered and class hierarchies. The poor and unskilled end up migrating to work in sectors of the economy such as construction work, brick kilns, domestic work, or informal service sector work within Nepal and India that offer very little possibility of social mobility, as exploitative structures prevail both in the recruitment and the work processes. For women who often, but

not always, end up working as domestic workers or care givers, migration has paradoxically offered both freedom and unfreedom.

Embarking on a journey to paid employment has certainly offered opportunities for income to women who otherwise are largely excluded from participation in the labor market. This has challenged the stereotypical representation of women as unproductive and contributed to financial gains and empowerment for women. However, the nature of domestic work reinforces gendered ideas of work, and their status as alien female domestic workers (from Nepal) makes women vulnerable to downward social mobility, discrimination, abuse, and exploitation. For men in destinations such as Qatar, while there are opportunities for increased income, these are erratic and do not necessarily lead to upward mobility. In addition, masculinity issues arise not only in an all-male environment away from family where sexuality is highly constrained but also in work that involves bodily harm, fatigue, social dislocation, and debt entrapment. While increasing numbers of men seek to assert their masculinity through migration, both in the form of earnings and wider experience beyond village life, migration does not automatically translate into affirmation of identity, as many migrants struggle to save money and end up working in difficult environments that offer very little possibility for social mobility.

#### ***Labor Organization***

Labor arrangements are made through informal channels and are under-regulated, i.e., recruitment, organization of working and living conditions, and remuneration take place in the absence of formal regulation. Much of the migration occurs through existing or traditional or patronage-based social networks, both in terms of recruitment as well as in the financing of migration, and there is a widespread use of a chain of largely informal brokers/mediators/contractors who are under-regulated. The formal mechanisms, such as banking or recruitment agencies, have not replaced the traditional practices of providing loans and facilitating migration. In fact, the formal depends on the traditional systems. Rather than to the employer,

migrants are tied to recruiters. It is the practice of recruitment of labor using brokers, who act on behalf of employers, that shapes the process of labor circulation, rather than the demand and supply of labor, as an economic argument might suggest. There is little or no possibility for recourse or redress once exploitative arrangements are entered into. Informal organizations of workers, trade unions, and the role of kinship and NGOs afford some protection. In some cases (carpet factories), they have mitigated the most obvious forms of exploitation, but because most migrant labor is highly segmented, as in the service and domestic labor sectors, workers' organization is difficult if not impossible, and often dangerous.

### ***Ideas of Modernity and Freedom***

Out-migration from rural Nepal is often associated with ideas of modernity, freedom, the escape from a regimented gender order and from the village life, and is seen as a way to achieve a certain idea of personal autonomy through cash income (*kamaune*), travel, adventure, and consumption in the cities and towns. Positive meanings of migration are attached to "being modern" or avoid being "*faltu*." While the risks are well known, they are played down or ignored. Many of those who migrate in search of modernity in cities and towns end up working in environments that keep them segregated from the rest of the population in the destination, with very little opportunity to participate in the world of modernity and freedom. Thus, the very idea of migration, as well as the working and living conditions, often result in restrictions on freedom and encourage self-exploitation. In their drive to earn money and participate in consumption, migrants are under constant pressure to work long hours and often in difficult working conditions that result in harm and exploitation.

Among the characteristics of migration we highlight the invisibility and seasonality of labor, and the structural violence and social suffering

that accompanies it. Labor is often subjected to both visible and invisible forms of discipline and whimsical treatment, including discrimination and humiliation. This is often accompanied by forced compliance with arbitrary norms, if not the stripping of the migrant's identity. The confiscation of the migrant worker's passport on arrival in the Gulf (and the impossibility of obtaining an exit permit without the agreement of the employer) is highly symbolic of the status of unfreedom, as is the ubiquitous humiliation of migrant workers at the Nepal-India border, or the self-exploitation of workers in brick kilns in Kathmandu. Although freedom drives mobility, mobility does not mean freedom. The commodification of labor has not been a source of emancipation. What we have is the persistence of structural violence and semi-feudal exploitation in a highly globalized context. This amounts to a kind of post-modernist feudalism. In this sense, commodification does not replace unfreedom, but thrives on it. Unfree labor is alive and well in Qatar (the world's highest GDP per capita—but only for Qataris, not for the migrant workers) and in various sectors of the economy in Kathmandu or in India where Nepalis work. Modernity and slavery coexist and support each other. In the hyper-globalized, genetically re-engineered society of Qatar, these unfreedoms are functional to the economic strategies of the state.

### ***Resistance***

While exploitation and suffering are widespread, migrants we spoke to did not resort to organized or collective forms of resistance. Throughout our fieldwork, we were surprised by how little our informants explicitly questioned the many inequalities they experienced. Resistance is limited to "weapons of the weak,"<sup>13</sup> which help to mitigate suffering but are poorly understood. For example, in Qatar, trade unions (for migrants) and strikes are banned but unofficial strikes, work-to-rule, absenteeism, etc. occur regularly. Migrants in the brick kilns or domestic workers may run away, or construction workers

<sup>13</sup> James C. Scott, 1985, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

do not turn up on time. Apart from these, migrant workers have accepted the work processes and recruitment practices that often exploit them. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence helps us explain why these inequalities have become routinely unquestioned and unchallenged by migrant workers. As Bourdieu argues, symbolic violence is the naturalization, including internalization, of social asymmetries. He explains that we perceive the social world through lenses issued forth from that very social world; thus we recognize (or "misrecognize") the social order as natural. The inequalities comprising the social world are thus made invisible, taken-for-granted, and normal for all involved. This helps us to understand the exploitation, if not the self-exploitation, that Nepali migrants are subjected to.

## IV. CONCLUSION

The exodus of labor from agriculture and the countryside has now become a regular phenomenon in Nepal. The opening up of the countryside to the outside world and the availability of roads and exposure to other forms of modernity has accelerated labor mobility on a larger scale than ever before. Cities, towns, and roadside bazars have grown; this has not been accompanied by a rapid expansion in industrial or other forms of regular employment. The migrants who end up in the cities, towns, and other destinations find a niche in the informal service sector. Their work is characterized by low pay, piece-rate payment, unskilled or under-skilled work, intermittent work, and no written contract or social protection.

Our findings suggest that a large number of men and women who leave their villages do not actually arrive and become “urban” in the cities and towns: their mobility is circulatory in nature. They return to their villages or move to another place when their contract is over or when they are no longer required. In this sense, labor migration is actually labor circulation. Those who move out of the village do not give up their residence there. They remain embedded in their village of origin through repeated visits and keeping up with village social networks. This is because they are accepted in the urban centers as temporary workers and keep up ties with the village as insurance if they fail to find other work. Also, for many, the dependent members of the family are left back home and need to be supported by remitting the savings they are able to make. Migrants hardly have an opportunity to find a niche for upward social mobility in the destination and change their work frequently or return back to the village once they run out of work. One of the paradoxes of Nepali migration amongst the poorer population is that the identity of the migrant remains attached to the village even if the working sites and sectors are “modern” and urban. For the marginal migrants, the circulatory nature of migration does not appear to be as transformative as might have been expected: while life in the destination may well be urban and modern, their identity remains rural, or at best “rurban.”

Overall, while the idea of freedom away from the regimented and constrained life in the village has been driving much of out-migration from rural Nepal, our findings suggest that mobility of labor has not necessarily meant more freedom for poorer migrants. The attached forms of labor that were embedded in social relationships, caste, and patronage are now replaced with time-bound, economic, flexible, and self-exploitative forms, without minimum social and economic protection. Escaping the ties of bondage and attachment has certainly led to optimism and some positive outcomes in terms of freedom to move. However, migration can also be an integral part of unfree labor, as it is often the process through which the worker is transferred from point of supply to point of demand.

Debt, borrowing from both traditional as well as modern institutions, is an important means through which many migrants seek to secure their future freedoms. Migrants consent to enter into relations of debt that entail very heavy restrictions on their freedom.

While migration has certainly opened up opportunities for cash income, the nature of work and working conditions have often resulted in social dislocation, humiliation, debt entrapment, social suffering, and structural violence. Migrants, however, despite known risks, appear to provide “consent” to work in exploitative working conditions. Resistance is limited to individual, everyday forms of resistance that help to mitigate suffering but which require further research to be better understood. We argue that the very gap between the recruitment of labor that is diffused and the weak central regulatory mechanism that is limited to issuing of the passport and “labor sticker” makes it easier for the exploitation of labor to occur.

The absence of the state compounds the exploitation. The state simultaneously benefits from migration (through remittances, and because migration acts as a safety valve that reduces social tension) but takes little responsibility for its regulation, other than in the



most extreme cases of exploitation that appear in the media or the public sphere. Kinship, district, and Nepali migrant NGOs provide limited protection and some sense of belonging. International regulatory mechanisms are equally ineffective and provide an avenue for limited advocacy at best.

While Nepal has witnessed a significant increase in the mobility of labor from rural areas to cities and towns, much of which is circulatory in nature, this has not resulted in the transformation in the livelihoods of the laboring population. Most of the poor population who circulate between the rural areas and urban centers do not have access to social protection mechanisms, which contributes to their increased vulnerability. In many cases, the aspiration to escape the strictures of caste-based or bonded labor arrangements and to engage with modernity actually results in a transition from traditional to modern and globalized forms of semi-feudal exploitation and self-exploitation without any protection.

## ANNEX I: INTERVIEW DATA

### Fieldwork in Kathmandu:

Brick kilns	21	(16 male, 5 female)
Carpet factories	4	(male)
Garment factory	4	(3 male, 1 female)
Construction workers	14	(10 male, 4 female)
Domestic workers	9	(female)
Gulf and Malaysia aspiring migrants	30	(17 male, 13 female)

### Fieldwork in Helambu, Sindhupalchowk:

Interviews with	11	(8 male, 3 female)
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### Fieldwork in Nepalgunj and surrounding area:

Interviews with	12	(9 male, 3 female)
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### Fieldwork in Salyan (brick kiln workers' village):

Interviews with	20	(12 male, 8 female)
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### Fieldwork in Dhangadhi:

Interviews with	3	(male)
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### Fieldwork in Uttarakhand, India:

Interviews travelling from border to Uttarakhand	7	(male)
Interviews with migrant laborers in Uttarakhand	15	(14 male, 1 female)

### Fieldwork in Qatar:

31	(29 male, 2 female)
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### Fieldwork in New Delhi:

27	(26 male, 1 female)
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<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>208</b>	
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## ANNEX II: PROFILE OF INTERVIEW SITES

Sector	Demographics	Cost	Recruitment	Work processes	System of payment	Working/living conditions	Nature of structural violence
<b>Within Nepal</b>							
Brick Kiln	Male/female/children, rural, relatively poorer	NRs 500–1,000, one-way fare paid by employer	<i>Naika</i>	Physical labor, semi-skilled, unfree to leave, half-day off on weekly basis, seasonal	Advance payment, ongoing expenses, piece rate per thousand	Long working hours, on-site very basic accommodation	Self-exploitation, unfair pay, advance payment, and bondage
Domestic	Female/children, rural, relatively poorer	NRs 1,000, arranged by employer	Self, social networks	Unskilled, household chores, unfree to leave, longer-term involvement	Cash or kind on monthly or annual basis, access to school	Long working hours, on-site accommodation	Humiliation, maltreatment, abuse
Construction	Male/female/children, rural, relatively poorer	NRs 1,000, arranged by migrant	<i>Naika</i> , self	Physical labor, semi-skilled/unskilled, free to leave, seasonal	Daily wage on weekly basis or longer	8–10 hours of work, rented shared accommodation or on-site	Self-exploitation, poor pay
Carpet	Male/female/children, rural, relatively poorer	NRs 1,000, arranged by migrant	<i>Naika</i>	Physical labor, semi-skilled, unfree to leave, half-day off weekly	Advance payment, monthly salary or piece rate	10–14 hours of work, on-site communal accommodation	Self-exploitation, poor pay
<b>Outside of Nepal</b>							
Construction (Gulf)	Male, rural and small towns, not the poorest	NRs 120,000 for travel, visa, arranged by migrant, loan	Recruitment agency, <i>dalal</i> , (middleman), kinship	Unskilled or semi-skilled, unfree to leave, one day off on weekly basis, contract for 2–3 years	Monthly salary	8–10 hours of work, communal housing provided (often poor quality)	Poor pay & working conditions, heat, debt, sexuality constrained, discrimination, deceit
Service Sector (Gulf)	Male and female, rural and small towns, not the poorest	NRs 120,000 for travel, visa, paid by migrant, loan	Recruitment agency, <i>dalal</i> , kinship	Unskilled, semi-skilled, few skilled, unfree to leave, half- or one day off on weekly basis, contract 2–3 years	Monthly salary	8–10 hours of work, communal housing provided	Poor pay & working conditions, debt trap, sexuality constrained, discrimination, deceit
Domestic (Gulf)	Female and a few male, not the poorest	NRs 120,000 for travel, visa, paid by migrant, loan	Recruitment agency, <i>dalal</i> , kinship	Unskilled, household chores, unfree to leave, contract for two years	Monthly salary	Extremely long working day, on-site accommodation	Poor pay & working conditions, debt trap, risk of physical/sexual abuse

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Sector	Demographics	Cost	Recruitment	Work processes	System of payment	Working/living conditions	Nature of structural violence
Agriculture (Gulf)	Male, poorer	NRs 120,000 for travel, visa, arranged by migrant, loan	Recruitment agency, <i>dalal</i> , kinship	Unskilled, physical labor, unfree to leave, a day off on monthly basis, contract for two years	Monthly salary	8–10 hours of work, on-site accommodation	Poor pay & working conditions, extreme heat, debt trap, sexuality constrained
Domestic (India)	Male and female, poorest, from hills	IRs 1,000–2,000 for travel	Kinship	Unskilled, household chores, free to leave	Monthly salary	10–14 hours of work, on-site accommodation	Poor pay, abuse, humiliation, maltreatment, discrimination
Service Sector (India)	Male, poorer, from hills	IRs 1,000–2,000 for travel	Kinship	Unskilled, semi-skilled or skilled, free to leave	Monthly salary	8–10 hours of work, rented communal accommodation	Poor pay, discrimination
Construction (India)	Male, poorest from hills	IRs 1,000–2,000 for travel	Kinship	Unskilled, free to leave, seasonal	Daily wage, advance payment	10–12 hours of work, on-sited tented accommodation	Long working hours, poor pay, discrimination



### ANNEX III: BASIC PROFILE OF NEPALI MIGRANT ORGANIZATIONS

Name	Sudur Paschim Sampark Manch	Nepali Samaj Sewa Samiti, Delhi	Pravash Nepali Jan Kalyan Samiti	Help Nepali Mission	Lumbini Gautam Buddha Charitable Trust	Shree Pashupati Sampark Manch	Newar Samaj
<b>Scope</b>	India	India	India	India	India	India	India
<b>Established</b>	2004	2010	2005	2010	2010	2007	1995
<b>Registered</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Affiliation</b>	None	None	None	None	None	None	None
<b>Members</b>	350	250	80	40	50	—	—
<b>President</b>	Bir Bahadur Bohora	Ghanshyam Sharma	Omkar Sharma	Kavi Karki	Deepak GC	Tulasi Dhakal	Yam Bahadur Shrestha,
<b>Major Activities</b>	Social and cultural programs	Social and cultural programs	Social and cultural programs	Social and cultural programs	Social and cultural programs	Social and cultural programs	Social and cultural programs
<b>Other</b>	Invited artists/singers from Nepal; organized health camps in Nepal; sent solidarity letter to Akhand Sudur Paschim movement	Organized HIV awareness programs, sports events	Organized Teej program in 2011; received support from Nepali embassy	Rescued trafficked Nepali women and minors	Dance/song performance; free medical camp also organized; received support from Nepali embassy	Organized cultural programs; supported children schooling; blood donation program; distributed blankets	Celebration of festivals; composed of both Nepali and Indian Newars

## ANNEX IV: BASIC PROFILE OF NEPALI MIGRANT POLITICAL PARTY ORGANIZATIONS

Name	Nepali Jan Sampark Samiti Bharat	Pravashi Nepali Sangh Bharat	Mulpravah Akhil Bhrarat Nepal Ekata Samaj	Akhil Bhrat Nepal Ekata Manch	Akhil Bhrat Nepal Ekata Manch	Nepali Ekata Samaj Bharat
<b>Scope</b>	All over India	All over India	All over India	All over India	All over India	All over India
<b>Established</b>	1967	1966	1979	2009	2012	2011
<b>Registered</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Affiliation</b>	Nepali Congress	CPN (UML)	CPN (Masal)	UCPN (Maoist)	UCPN (Maoist Vaidya faction)	CPN (United)
<b>Office</b>	Mumbai, Delhi (rent)	Faridabad, Haryana (own)	Badarpur, New Delhi (own)	Shalimar Bagh, New Delhi (rent)	—	Palpali Camp, Okhala, New Delhi
<b>Total Members</b>	22,000	9,000	50,000	60,000	—	—
<b>President</b>	Bal Krishna Pandey	Khem C. Dhakal	Durga KC	T. P. Pathak	Laxman Pant	Rishi Pun
<b>Major Activities</b>	Political, festivals, sports	Political, festivals	Political, festivals, sports	Political, festivals, sports	Political	Political, festivals, sports
<b>Other</b>	13 state committees	13 state and 109 city committees	10 state-level committees	Banned in India in 2002, but functioned as <i>Nepali Jana Adhikar Suraksha Samiti</i>	Just split	Split from Mulpravah on the issue of ethnicity

CPN: Communist Party of Nepal

UML: United Marxist-Leninist Party

UCPN: United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)



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